
NO PLACE I'D
RATHER BE

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Chapter 1

WYOMING, 1888

Elsie Beaumont took one final, deep breath in a futile attempt to calm her nerves as the train chugged to a stop. Most people would be disembarking temporarily so they could stretch their legs while the train took on more coal and water. Then they would get back on and continue with their trip. But not Elsie. No, with any luck at all, Buffalo Ridge would be her new home.

She looked around as she descended the stairs, hoping this little town would be clean, full of friendly people, have a nice boarding house for ladies, and most of all, have a business that was willing to hire a young lady looking for a new life. As she took a few steps onto the train platform, clutching her valise, she watched the people who had also departed from the train. They were all headed toward the town café, after having been assured they had time to get a cup of coffee and piece of pie before the train would be ready to pull out and continue on.

She'd planned on going there, as well, but to talk to the owner. It was obvious it would be busy for the foreseeable

future, or at least until the train left, so she headed in the opposite direction. It was time to acquaint herself with Buffalo Ridge. She walked down the boardwalk, looking at each building and the business inside. She made a mental note of any place that might possibly be looking to hire someone. She planned on checking with the mercantile and dressmaker's shop first, then any restaurants in town, but if nothing panned out there, she would go back and ask at any other places she thought might hold out even a teensy bit of hope.

The first of those places she came across was the mercantile. She knew she was probably filthy from riding the train for three days, but she brushed her dress off the best she could, attempted to fix her hair a bit, then squared her shoulders and walked inside. She was surprised by the size of the mercantile, expecting a bigger store, and immediately wondered if maybe there were two general stores in town. She glanced around quickly as she made her way straight to the counter and the man working behind it. Seemingly sensing someone was looking for him, he turned toward her and smiled. "Good afternoon, ma'am. I don't believe I've seen you around before. I'm Joe Shipman. Can I help you find something?"

"I was hoping to speak with the owner. Would that be you?"

"Yes, my wife and I own and operate this store. How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for employment and was hoping you could use some help."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but the two of us have been operating this store since we opened it eight years ago. Buffalo Ridge was starting to grow then and we opened it and have been running it since. I'm sorry."

"Well, thank you for your time, Mr. Shipman. I don't

suppose you know of anyone in town who might be in need of help in their establishment?"

"No, I'm sorry, I don't, but I can ask around some if you'd like. Will you be staying at the hotel?"

"To be honest, I don't really know yet. I was hoping to secure employment, then ask if they would be able to guide me to the best place in town to stay. I'm on a rather tight budget until I have a regular paycheck. Would you have any suggestions for me?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't really have any ideas. Other than the hotel, I don't know of anyplace else. There is a boarding house, but it's for men only. I'll ask around, and if I hear of anything, I'll check with the hotel and see if I can find you. I wish you the best."

"Thank you." Elsie turned and held her head up as she left, hoping he couldn't see her hands trembling.

Once outside, she walked on down the boardwalk, again looking for a business that might be able to use her assistance.

The next place she stopped was the dressmaker's shop. Like Joe Shipman, Rose Andrews was nice but assured her she and her daughter, Alice, were able to take care of the town's needs. She also wished her the best of luck but didn't have any suggestions for her.

Buffalo Ridge wasn't as big a town as Elsie had pictured, and before she knew it, she was at the restaurant everyone from the train had headed toward. She went in and sat down, feeling much more tired than she expected to feel now. Hopefully, a cup of tea wouldn't cost too much and would serve to refresh her.

Minnie Slater, a middle-aged lady with dark hair, came over not long after she sat down. "Good afternoon. Are you here for a meal or just some pie and coffee?"

"I'd really like a cup of tea and to talk with the owner if he or she is available."

Minnie sat down across from her and patted her hand. "I'm the owner, and you look like you could use more than a cup of tea. Maybe a friend, someone to talk to?"

"That would be wonderful, too, but I'm afraid I don't know anyone here," Elsie said, feeling at ease around this friendly-looking lady she'd never met before.

"I'll be right back with some tea for both of us and we'll talk a few minutes. I sure could use a rest myself." She left, and Elsie took a minute to look around. She didn't see anyone else in the restaurant, either patron or worker. She must have been working alone when the crowd from the train all came in at once. Elsie was sure she had to have just about run her legs off, making sure everyone got what they wanted quickly so they could make it back to the train on time.

With that thought, she got up and started clearing some of the tables. She'd sat at the only table that was clean. She might not know where things belonged, but she could at least stack dishes and put them on one table, clearing others so if customers came in, there was a clean table to sit at.

She found a dish rag and was washing off the four tables she'd cleared when Minnie came back in with two cups of tea and two pieces of pie. She stopped as she saw the table Elsie had been sitting at empty and looked around. A smile crossed her lips when she saw what she'd done. "You certainly didn't need to do that, but I would be fool-hardy to complain. Come sit down and have some tea and pie."

Half an hour later, the two ladies were talking like old friends. "Now, Elsie, you said you'd like to talk to the owner. What would you like to talk about?"

"Well, I've been hoping you could use some help in your

restaurant. I'm new in town and need to find some type of employment."

Minnie's shoulders slumped. "Oh, honey, I wish I could afford to pay you. The truth is I can always use some help, but I honestly don't have the money to pay anyone. I'm so sorry."

"I understand."

She paused for several moments, fidgeting. Minnie could tell she wanted to ask something else but was hesitating. "What is it, Elsie? Please ask. I won't be upset."

She looked up at Minnie with sad eyes, but there was something more that Minnie saw in those eyes. She looked a bit desperate. "I hate to ask, but would you be able to spare a meal if I help you here?"

Minnie's eyebrows shot up as she looked at Elsie. "I can surely do that. Could I ask why you're here, looking for employment? Buffalo Ridge is not a big town or a town known to have an abundance of job openings. You said you don't know anyone here, so if you don't have family here, can I ask what brings you here? You're awfully young. Where is your family, and do they know you're here? This is probably none of my business, but—"

"No, it's all right. You have a right to know, after the big favor I've asked of you. To be honest, I'm not really sure what I'm doing here or what I'm hoping for. I'm from Philadelphia. We actually lived just outside the city, but close. My mama died when I was young and I was raised by my papa. He's a good man," she said as she started fighting back tears, "or was a good man. He had a couple of businesses in town, and we were happy. Then one day, he got a nasty letter, saying he was a terrible man for what he'd done to this man and didn't deserve to live. He had no idea what the man in the letter was talking about and finally figured he must have the wrong man."

"That would be a scary thing, though," Minnie said.

"It was. Nothing else happened for five months, though, and we'd forgotten about it. But then Papa was out of town on a business trip, and one night I heard what sounded like horses approaching. I had been ready to go to bed and had just turned off the lantern, so it was dark in the house. I couldn't imagine why anyone would be coming to visit that late, so I walked to the window and looked out, without lighting the lantern. I saw three men on horses, all carrying a torch with fire at the end. One man yelled out my father's name. He said it wouldn't do him any good to hide, as he'd told everyone in town what kind of man he was and what he'd done. He said to come outside or they would burn the house down."

Minnie gasped. "Oh, my goodness."

"I didn't know what to do, and I panicked. Hearing them yelling again, I quickly put my clothes back on, pulled out my valise and grabbed a few things, then climbed out my bedroom window. When I was younger, if Papa told me I had to stay inside instead of going outside, I would climb out my window and into the tree right there. Then I could easily climb from one limb of that tree to another limb of a tree that stood next to that one. From there, I could climb down that tree without being seen. I hoped I could still do that and not be seen."

"I take it you succeeded?"

"I did. I ran into the woods nearby and watched our house and everything in it burn to the ground."

"Oh, you poor dear."

"I didn't know what to do. I was afraid to go into town. We lived close enough to town that I was sure people in town saw the fire, but no one came to help put it out. There were a few other houses out our way, and we were close enough to town that if people thought there was a problem at any of

our houses, they came running, but not that night. I didn't know what those men had told people in town, but it was pretty obvious that something was going on. Normally, there would have been people running out to help, but not one person came." She was fighting a losing battle with tears as she wiped her eyes.

"That would be upsetting. What did you do?"

"Papa was due home the next day, late morning. I stayed in the woods all night so I would be there and see when he got home. I knew he would be able to explain what was happening and would know what to do. But he didn't show up the next day. I waited all day, but he didn't come home. I walked to my friend Ellen's house that evening, staying outside of town and coming up to the back of their house. When her father answered the door, he looked around and pulled me inside quickly. He asked me if my father and I were all right, and I explained what had happened the night before and that Papa never came home. I told him what those men yelled and asked him if he knew what they were upset about. He said some men had gone into town the day before saying some nasty things about Papa, but he didn't believe it, so he didn't listen to them. He said he never expected anything like what happened, or he would have listened better."

"So you still don't know what they were upset about?"

"No. He told me I should stay the night with them, and the next day he would see what he could find out. He advised me not to go outside and told Ellen not to mention to anyone that I was there. When he came home that evening, he was very hesitant to share what he'd found out. I told him it was all right, I could handle it, but I had to know what was going on. He said the men hadn't been specific but had said my father had stolen from many people. They also said he didn't

deserve to live, and that I, his daughter, could have been helping him."

"Oh, no," Minnie said with a sharp intake of breath.

"Ellen's dad said he didn't feel I was safe in Philadelphia right now because those strangers had some people all upset. He and his wife and Ellen said they were going to visit family, and they hid me in a trunk on the back of their buggy. Once we were far enough away, he stopped and let me out, then he took me to a railroad station in a nearby town to catch a train. Ellen's family is terrific. They don't have much money, but he gave me all he could come up with. I thanked them and bought a ticket that would take me as far away from Philadelphia as I could get."

"And that happened to be to Buffalo Ridge?"

"Yes."

"You poor thing. You don't have any money or any place to stay."

"I'm more than willing to work and was hoping to find employment today. I was afraid if I left my bedroom to go downstairs, the men would see me, so I was only able to grab a few things from my bedroom. Therefore, I have a little money, but very little. I hoped it would be enough for a room at a boarding house until I got my first paycheck." Minnie saw her fighting back tears and felt so sorry for the poor young lady. "Elsie, I don't have enough money to hire you, but I'm not going to let you go hungry with nowhere to sleep, either. If you don't mind sleeping on my couch, you can stay with me while we find a solution to this. You help me some here and I'll keep you fed, and we'll talk to everyone who comes in here and see if we can't find you a job."

Elsie's eyes lit up. "Do you mean that, really? You'll let me sleep on your couch?"

"I'm sorry I don't have an extra bedroom, but—"

"No, a couch is fine. Thank you so much, Miss Slater. I'll do my best to help you."

"Oh, I'm sure you will. You've already cleared tables for me. One thing I will ask, though."

"Of course, anything I can do."

"Please call me Minnie. Everyone in town does."

"All right, Minnie. Thank you ever so much."

"You're welcome. Now, will that pie and coffee do you until after our rush hour for supper, or do you need something more to eat before we get too busy?"

"No, I'll be good. I haven't had much of an appetite lately, but that pie sure tasted good. Now, I'll take these dirty dishes to the back, get the rest of the tables washed off, then wash the dishes, unless there's something else you'd rather have me do first."

Things got busy shortly after the ladies got to work, and it was three hours later before the supper rush was over and the ladies had a minute to rest. "Would you rather we eat now or after we finish up here?" Minnie asked.

"If you have a preference, I'm all right with it, but if you're asking me, I would prefer to get our work done first. Then we won't have to get up and start in again."

Minnie laughed but nodded in agreement. "That's what I usually do, and for the same reason. Once I sit down, I don't want to have to get back up and start working again. Let's finish cleaning up and we'll take our meals upstairs to my living quarters to eat."

Two hours later, they were enjoying their supper at Minnie's kitchen table. They talked a bit more about Elsie's horrible experience. "You left so quickly, you probably don't have much in the way of clothes. Do you have everything you need? You're enough smaller than I am that my clothes wouldn't fit you too well, but I know there are a couple ladies in town who are smaller, like you, and they may have

an old dress or two they could part with. People here may not have much, but they're good people. If ladies know you are in need and are about their size, they will help if they can."

"I appreciate that so much, but let's see what happens. I was able to grab a couple dresses and a few other things quickly. I think it's good enough for a few days anyway, unless you think the ones I grabbed don't look good enough to be helping you here."

"I'm sure they'll be fine. We don't dress fancy here. We'll wait and see if we can find you someone needing help, but please tell me if you find you need something, even underthings. I don't want to embarrass you, but please don't go without things you need."

"All right, I'll tell you if I need something, and thank you. I don't know what I would have done without you, Minnie. I don't know quite how to thank you."

"You're welcome. Now, let me get you a sheet and blanket for the couch. I'm sure you're worn out from your traveling, so sleep in tomorrow. When you're up and ready, come on downstairs and you can help me during the busy times. It sure was nice having help tonight. I'll do some asking around and we'll see if we can't find you a job."

Minnie was surprised to see Elsie downstairs the next morning and ready to help before the breakfast crowd arrived. She'd done most of what she referred to as her preliminaries before it got busy. She'd made biscuits, some gravy to pour over them, had bread on rising for the supper hour and tomorrow's breakfast, and made six pies. She was getting ready to put on her specials for the day when Elsie stepped in with a big smile.

"What can I do to help?" Elsie asked as she tied an apron on.

"Well, good morning. I didn't expect to see you down here this early."

"I slept great last night, much better than on the train, and I feel refreshed. Now, what can I do?"

"Well, I'm ready to put our specials for the day on. I'm having chicken and dumplings and a beef roast. I cooked three chickens yesterday and they're in the icebox. If you want to start pulling the meat off the bones, I'll get the roast on. Then I'll need mashed potatoes for both specials, so it'll take a big pot of them today."

"Ooh, those specials both sound delicious. I'll pull the chicken off the bone, but I've never made chicken and dumplings. I'd love to learn how, though. Would you mind terribly if I watch?"

"Of course, you can watch. You've never made it before, really?"

Elsie blushed but admitted, "We had a cook at home. She used to let me watch a lot, and the last few years I convinced her to let me help. I love to cook, which surprised her for some reason. But she never made chicken and dumplings. I never understood why because I love it, but we never had it at home."

Minnie stopped working and was facing Elsie. "You had a cook?"

"Yes," Elsie admitted, looking rather sheepish.

"But you seemed to know your way around the kitchen last night when you were helping me."

"Like I said, I love to cook. The last couple years, our cook let me help most of the time." She kept watching as Minnie got out her spices to put on the beef roasts she had set out. When she started cutting up some of the spices and sprinkling them on, she stepped in. "Minnie, would you mind

if I showed you how our cook seasoned her roasts? People used to say they were the best roasts they'd ever tasted, and our cook always told me it was just in the spices you use and how you use them. Maybe I could try it on one roast, then you can see what you think?"

"That's a great idea. I'm always open to new thoughts and ideas. I probably shouldn't do all of them a new way at first, though, until I see how everyone will react. They eat roast pretty good. Well, good enough that I always make three or four of them, depending on how big they are."

"I'm sure they're delicious, and I agree, I'll try it on this one smaller one. Then see what you think. If you don't care for it, we can save it for last and put lots of gravy over it to hide the flavor."

Minnie giggled. "I doubt it can be that bad. Go ahead, I'm eager to see what you do and how it tastes."

She watched as Elsie chopped the fresh herbs into small, fine pieces, adding two that Minnie didn't normally put on a roast, then put them in a bowl and added some salt, pepper, and a little butter. She smashed them all together with the back of a spoon, then spread it over the roast like she was spreading a slice of bread. "That butter combination smells delicious," Minnie said. "I've never heard of putting butter on a roast, but I can't wait to try it."

They got busy then and had both specials and the potatoes on cooking before the morning crowd started coming in. Elsie assured her she was quite comfortable cooking eggs any way people wanted them, so Minnie suggested she cook while Minnie waited on people. She was sure people would ask who was cooking, and that would give her a good way to ask people if they knew of anyone who could possibly use help. Elsie agreed, and from the first time the door opened and a customer came in, it seemed nonstop for two hours.

When the last of the crowd left, Minnie carried a load of

dirty dishes into the kitchen. "Let's make ourselves a big plate and go sit down to eat. Then we'll tackle the dishes and get ready for the lunch crowd. We need food first, though," she said with a giggle."

Fifteen minutes later, they were enjoying what Elsie thought seemed like a feast, but she found she was hungrier than she'd realized.

"You're not used to working that fast," Minnie explained. "You work up an appetite, but don't worry, you'll work it back off at lunchtime."

Elsie chuckled but didn't doubt a word of what Minnie was saying. "So, did you have any luck finding me a job yet?"

"Not yet, but we're getting the word out. Something will come up; I know it will. Until it does, you're welcome to stay on my couch. I'm afraid you're going to have me spoiled, though. It sure does feel good to have a minute to sit down and put my feet up while I eat.

"I don't know how you do it all yourself. You take people's orders, then go cook it and take it to them?"

"Yes, but I generally get three or four tables' orders at once, go cook it, take it out and start over. It's hectic, but people understand I'm doing the best I can and are generally pretty patient. The only trouble I ever have is when the train stops in. They come down here for a quick bite, usually coffee and pie, and they only have a little time before they have to be back on the train. They tend to be a bit impatient, but I can only do so much. If they get nasty, I tell them I'm sorry and they're welcome to go somewhere else."

"I didn't know there was someplace else in Buffalo Ridge."

"There isn't," Minnie said with a laugh. When they'd finished eating, Minnie stood. "Go ahead and rest a few more minutes if you want. I can't wait to try the roast you spiced up this morning."

"I was thinking about that, too. I hope you're not disappointed. I'm hoping there's some chicken and dumplings left for supper tonight. I've been smelling it all morning, and it smells wonderful."

"I was thinking the same thing about the roast," Minnie said with a laugh. "It's smelled good all morning. I can't wait any longer to try it."

The two ladies hurried to the back and Minnie pulled out the pan with the small roast and cut a piece off. She smelled it and closed her eyes. "It smells fantastic." She took a bite and rolled her eyes. "Oh, my goodness, Elsie, it's delicious. I wish we'd done all of them like this."

She cut off a small piece and handed it to Elsie to try. "Is this what it normally tastes like?"

Elsie ate her bite of it and nodded. "It is. I like it and I'm glad you like it, but it may be better that we didn't do all of them like this. Do you think your customers will like it?"

"I think they'll love it. But I'll tell you what I'm going to do. If you'll help in the kitchen again, I think we should put a little piece, just a bite or two of the new flavored roast on each plate, along with a serving of what I usually make. I'll tell them all I'm trying a new spice combination and point out which bite is different. Then I'll get their reactions. I have a feeling people are going to love it. I know I do."

"I hope they do. I'd hate to lead you astray."

"Oh, honey, don't you worry about that. I think we're going to become good friends and you're going to be a big help for me while we're finding you a job."