

CHAPTER 1



Sheriff Dawson Nolan stretched his fingers out under the table to keep them from forming fists as he tried his best to keep his patience. That task was becoming more and more difficult the longer he sat listening to Mayor Clyde Robertson drone on and on about how much the mayor's office, where they and six other town merchants were presently gathered, needed to be moved to a newer and larger building.

When he gave the floor to Tom Wakefield, who ran the general store, Dawson had a pretty good idea what was coming, but turned to face Tom and hear what he had to say. "Thank you, Mayor," Tom said. "Like you and I'm sure all of us here, I think our little town of Pine Falls is a good town. It's a good place to live, but we can make it better. I think it would benefit the whole town if our general store could grow. With a bigger building and more inventory people would have more choices. I think it would attract people to this area, and our little town would grow."

Dawson made an effort to stretch his hands once again, not liking the fists he kept finding he was making without meaning to. Having already heard how the blacksmith felt a new, larger forge would help the town significantly, and the livery owner explaining

how a larger building and a few more good horses would benefit Pine Falls, he was beginning to lose control of what little patience he had left. Even Lenore Atkins, the widow and town's seamstress, had explained how one of those newfangled treadle sewing machines would allow her to make her dresses and shirts quicker, thus improving the lives of everyone in Pine Falls.

The one person who had caught his attention was Helen Langston, who had explained how the small room above the church where she was currently teaching the children of Pine Falls, was becoming a problem. When Pine Falls decided they needed to have a school, she agreed to teach them. At that time the room was fine for the six students she had. Now that the town has grown, the room will hardly hold all fifteen students, and it was difficult for all fifteen of them to share the few books they had.

Pine Falls was lucky to have Helen as their teacher. She was the daughter of Max and Louise Langston, who owned and operated the hotel in town. They'd moved from back east when their motel had burned after being struck by lightning. A new motel had opened a few months earlier in the same town and both hotels had been struggling financially, so when it burned down they decided to relocate out west. With no competition, their hotel in Pine Falls was doing as good as could be expected for a small town. They were good, honest people and ran a good hotel, so the sheriff was glad it was doing okay.

Their daughter had gone to school back east and was one of the few people in town that was qualified to teach. Even though she was only sixteen at the time she began teaching, she was very smart and very likable, which made her a fine teacher. However, she was also very quiet and didn't complain or ask for much, so the sheriff hadn't realized there was a problem with the space the school was in or the lack of books. He was glad Helen had made him aware of it now, even if that was the only piece of information he'd deemed interesting in the last hour.

His attention was pulled back to the room as the mayor and

Ralph Clemons, the blacksmith, got into an argument over which project would benefit the town more. He watched as Tom joined in the argument. When two others stood, ready to join in, he lost his battle with his patience and pounded his hand on the table before standing himself.

Sheriff Nolan was six feet tall and with a sturdy, muscular build, his presence demanded attention. When his hand came down on the table, the room grew quiet. As he stood, everyone else sat down and looked up at him, waiting to hear what he had to say.

He didn't make them wait long. "That's enough. Mayor Robertson, it's quite clear to me why you summoned me here. Each of you wanted a chance to tell me how you think I should spend the money from Ernie Rucker's estate. I'm not sure why, but for whatever reason, Ernie put that decision in my hands. He wanted it to be used for the benefit of the town, and that's exactly what I plan to do. I'm not at all sure how yet, but I plan on giving it a lot of thought, and will eventually do something I think Ernie would be pleased with."

"We're just giving you some good suggestions," Mayor Robertson said. "You may not be aware of some of the needs of the town."

"I will admit that's true," the sheriff admitted. "Helen, I had no idea the school was that crowded or that you only had a few books the children were all trying to share. Now that I know that, I see we need to do something to remedy that situation. I'll be giving it much thought over the next day or two and will come up with some kind of solution."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Helen said quietly.

He nodded toward her before turning to the rest of the group gathered around the table. "As for the rest of you, I can see that your ideas would probably help some people in this town, but it seems quite obvious it would help each of you out the most. I don't believe that's what Ernie had in mind."

Several of the people seemed upset, but he continued before

they could respond. "As this town grows and there are more people buying from the general store, Tom, I'm sure you'll be able to expand your inventory. The same goes for each of you. Ralph, as your business grows you'll have the funds to buy that larger forge, and the same goes for all of you. That's how a business grows."

"How am I to grow my business, Sheriff?" the mayor asked, looking rather proud to point that fact out.

"Frankly, I'm not sure why you feel you need a bigger, newer office, Mayor. We all fit around this table easily enough, and I can't think of any reason you would need anything bigger than this. If we need to have a town meeting we meet at the church, where there's room for everyone. If that situation changes as the town grows, we can look at the situation again. But as for now, I would appreciate it if everyone would let me give this situation some thought and allow me to come up with what I think would suit this town best."

Tom Wakefield was visibly upset. "But why should we all sit back and let you make the decision based solely on your thoughts? You're not the only member of this town."

Fred Miller quickly stood, as he saw others becoming agitated, as well. "I'd like to answer that question, if I could. As you probably all know, I'm the attorney that wrote Mr. Rucker's Last Will and Testament, and I talked to Ernie about it quite a bit before we wrote it. He knew exactly what he wanted to do with his estate, and after talking to him about it at length, I not only understood what he wanted, but I have a lot of respect for the man. I always have, but it grew after hearing his wishes."

"I think we all had respect for Ernie," the sheriff said, and looked around as everyone nodded in agreement.

"Then respect him now," Fred went on to say. "When he came to me wanting to write his will, he said he had no family left to leave his estate to. He explained that the people in Pine Falls had been good and honest and fair to him, and he proudly thought of everyone here as his family. For that reason he wanted to leave

what he had to the town. Now, he knew someone had to be in charge, and he chose the man he most respected and knew loved this town like he did. He lived next door to Sheriff Nolan, had a lot of respect for him and knew he would see that it went for something that would benefit the town. That's why we need to let the sheriff make the decision himself. It's what Ernie wanted."

The room grew quiet, and Fred waited a moment before continuing. "Ernie and I talked a great deal before I wrote the will. I wanted to be sure I understood exactly what his wishes were. In fact, he helped me write it, changing the wording in a couple places. I made sure it stated his wishes clearly, and he read it over before signing it. I know for certain this is exactly what he wanted to do with his estate. I also know that when Fred died and news of his will had gotten out, people smiled and said it was kind of him. No one was too concerned until they learned that Mr. Rucker had a much larger estate than any of us realized."

Many of the men dropped their heads, knowing what Fred said was true. "Now all of a sudden everyone is concerned and has their own ideas as to how it should be spent," Fred continued. "Well, it's not our concern. Dawson is a fine man, and I agree with Ernie; he was a good choice to determine how it should be spent. As sheriff, he knows as much about the people and goings on in Pine Falls as anyone. He's also an honest person, and I think he'll do a good job for the town, if we let him."

Everyone was still quiet, and the sheriff decided to take advantage of that. "Thank you, Fred." With that, he turned and left, closing the door behind him. Whatever happened next didn't really concern him. He just hoped Fred could finally get them to realize it was his choice and his choice alone.



THE SHERIFF DIDN'T KNOW for sure, but he suspected Fred talked to the group more after he left, maybe admonished them a bit. Over

the next few days, when one of the people at the meeting saw him in town they took a moment to apologize for trying to push their ideas onto him. He stopped at the hotel to have lunch in their restaurant, and both Mr. and Mrs. Langston greeted him. After they apologized, as well, he was convinced Fred had said something to them. On his way back to his office after lunch that day he stopped in at Fred's office.

The bell chimed as the sheriff walked in. Fred walked into the front room to meet him. "Welcome, Dawson, come on in. What brings you here?"

Dawson shook hands with his friend as he answered. "I wanted to stop by and thank you. I'm not sure what you told everyone at the mayor's office after I left, but instead of getting more suggestions from people than I know what to do with, I've gotten apologies. Whatever you told them, thank you."

Fred laughed as he sat down and motioned for Dawson to do the same. "If they all apologized, maybe I was a bit harsh with them. I meant what I said, though. Enough of a burden has been placed on you to decide how to spend that money without each of them throwing their two cents in. Besides, I agree with you, their ideas would all benefit them more than the town as a whole. I think Ernie knew what he was doing when he designated you to be in control of it."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence," Dawson said, "though right now I'm not sure I'm feeling as confident about that as you."

"There's no rush. He didn't put a time limit on it, so take your time. There's no guarantee, but I'd be willing to bet that some day an idea will hit you and you'll know it's the right thing."

"I'm hoping the same thing," Dawson admitted. "In fact, I've been planning on talking to you once that idea hits me over the head."

"You don't have to talk to me about it first," Fred said. "Ernie made it clear that the decision is yours alone."

"I understand, but I respect you, and I'd sure appreciate it if I

could run any ideas I have past you first. You're a smart man with a lot of common sense and I'd like to take advantage of that if I could."

"Thank you now for your vote of confidence in me," Fred said with a smile. "As long as you agree that whatever I may say you will think about, but ultimately do as you feel best, I'll be happy to be your sounding board."

"Thank you. Having said that, what do you think of the town building a schoolhouse?"

"I think that's the kind of thing Ernie had in mind. It's something that would be for the benefit of the entire town. Not all little towns around here have any kind of a school, so having a schoolhouse large enough to house all our children plus extra room to grow would be a true asset to Pine Falls."

"I agree. I'm glad Helen was at that meeting. I believe teaching our kids to read and write is very important, and I had no idea we had outgrown our school this quickly. I don't know of any buildings we could use for a school, so I think we need to build one. I thought maybe that empty patch of ground next to the hotel might be perfect. There's plenty of room between the hotel and that patch of houses leading out of town. It's big enough we could build a bigger building than we need now, but still have plenty of room for the kids to go outside to play at noon. What do you think?"

"I think that would work well. Helen wouldn't have far to walk to get there, that's for sure," Fred said with another smile. "I'm sure she would appreciate that. How do you plan to do it?"

"I thought we can use money from the trust to buy the lumber from Joe Pickens and his sawmill. Pete Burgan's a good builder and could use a little extra money right now. He took time off to be with his wife when she was sick, so I thought maybe we could get him to make up some plans and supervise the project. Since it's for the whole town I think we should pick a day to build it, post a notice and ask for volunteers to help. If several men show up we should be able to get it built in a day. We might even be able to

move the desks and things into it and get a good stove in and hooked up to keep them warm.”

“I like the whole idea, and I think Ernie would, too. I'm sure Pete will appreciate the work, too.”

They visited a few more minutes, and when Dawson left a short time later he felt good as he headed to talk to Joe and Pete. Then he'd talk to Helen about what books she'd like to have and how many, and talk to Tom about ordering them. This would be a small portion of the trust fund, but he felt good about using it this way. He hoped he'd feel this confident about everything else he decided to spend the money on.



OVER THE NEXT several days Dawson spoke with many of the town's men, particularly the fathers. He told them about the plans to build a schoolhouse so they could accommodate more children, and got positive responses. Most assured him they'd be there to help build it when they were ready. That was encouraging.

As he'd hoped, Pete made a diagram of the building. Dawson looked it over, and approved it. He had Pete give him a list of the lumber and materials they would need for it, and dropped it off at Joe's sawmill and Ralph's forge so they could start getting the lumber and nails they would need. He talked to Tom at the general store to see about ordering a stove. Tom assured him he had a good wood burning stove on hand that would work to heat the school. When Dawson looked at it he agreed, so that was taken care of. Joe and Ralph both assured Dawson they would have the lumber and nails ready within two weeks, so Dawson set a date and posted a notice.

The upcoming new schoolhouse soon became the talk of the town. Most of the men planned on being there to help get it built. There weren't a lot of women in Pine Falls, as many of the men that moved there were either miners or farmers there to claim land, but

there were a few that had moved there as a family. Those ladies tended to band together at events like this to provide food for the men who were working, and they were busy making their plans for the schoolhouse raising, as well.

When the big day arrived, Dawson was pleased. Most of the town's men showed up, ready to work. Pete had the plans in hand, and quickly got different men working on different projects. Dawson had previously hired some men to bring horses in and pull out shrubs and level the ground where the schoolhouse would be built, so they could get right to it. He watched a few minutes as the men worked together; some bringing stones from the nearby creek for the foundation, while others dug the dirt out and arranged the rocks. Others started measuring and cutting the wood, all under Pete's watchful eyes. Still others were making more desks, since they found out the kids were pretty crowded in the ones they had, which made it harder for them to learn to write.

Happy with how things were moving along, he made his way to where the women had gathered, to see if they needed assistance. A couple of the men had made a make-shift kitchen out of stumps of wood with wide boards spread between them, and had a fire going. The ladies had brought food and were preparing it, cooking over the fire. They assured him they had everything they needed and would have a meal ready for everyone around noon.

Looking around, he saw Joe had brought several more chunks of wood in two sizes to support long thick planks he'd also brought. The taller ones would be used for tables, and the shorter ones would be benches. He looked around and found Joe so he could thank him and offer to pay him for doing that extra. He knew cutting a large tree into chunks like that prevented Joe from using that tree as timber, but he appreciated it. Joe refused to take any money for it, however, saying that was his donation to the town's schoolhouse.

Dawson started helping Joe, who was cutting the boards to the

lengths Pete requested. As normal, they talked while they worked. "Joe, are you sure I can't pay you for the wood?"

"No, you're not paying me," Joe said with a smile. "I'm hoping one day I'll have some kids of my own, and it'll be good having a school for them to go to."

Dawson looked at his friend, obviously a bit surprised. "You planning on getting married?"

"I hope to some day, sure. Doesn't everyone?"

"Well, I suppose it would be nice, sure, but there's not a lot of ladies around here. Have you got a plan on how to solve that problem?"

"I just might," Joe said as a slow grin spread over his face. He reached into his back pocket and handed Dawson a newspaper from Denver. "Last month when I went to see my brother, we took a day and went into their local town. They had an old copy of this newspaper from Denver. There's a story in there about a man that sent for a mail order bride."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Take that home with you and read it. It tells how they exchanged letters a while, and when it seemed to both of them they'd be compatible, he bought a ticket on the train from Boston, then the stagecoach for the rest of the trip. They got married the day she got to his little town. That was two years ago and they're real happy. They even have a little baby boy now."

Dawson straightened up to take a good look at Joe. "Are you thinking about sending off for a mail order bride, too?"

Joe turned a little red, but nodded. "They give an address there of some newspapers you can put an ad in if you're looking for one, and I already sent a notice off to two different papers. I got a response from a lady that sounds real nice."

The pride and excitement on Joe's face was something Dawson couldn't miss. He patted him on the back as he nodded his head. "I'm glad to hear it, Joe. Good luck."

"You should think about it, too, Dawson. Take that paper home with you and read the story."

"Okay, I'll take it and read it, but I'm not sure I'm ready to do something like that."

"Why not?"

"Don't get me wrong, I hope everything goes real well for you. But what if it doesn't? What if it turns out you just don't get along?"

"That's why you exchange letters first. You find out about each other and make sure you both feel you would be good together."

"Maybe," Dawson said, still not totally convinced. "Why is she willing to leave her family and come across country to live with a man she's never met? She must be running from something, but what?"

"I know what you're saying, Dawson, because I thought the same thing. Unless she's in trouble with the law or something, why would she want to leave her family behind? I can't answer for all of them, but the lady that sent me a letter, Miss Elizabeth Masters, needs a place to live. Her mother died when she was born, and she was raised by her father, who never remarried or had any other kids. He was killed a couple months ago when the horse he was riding was spooked and he was thrown. The only family she has is an aunt, who she's staying with, even though she'd only met her once before. Her aunt is barely getting by on her own, though, and can't really afford to feed Elizabeth, too. She's looked for some kind of job, but hasn't found anything."

Dawson took a moment to absorb that information. "I guess I could see moving out here then. If she really doesn't know her aunt, she's not close to her, and has no other family."

"I can't speak for others, but she seems to have a good reason to be willing to move out here. That was one thing I planned on asking, but she explained it in the first letter she sent. You should think about taking an ad out in a newspaper or two. Take that along with you and read it when you have a chance."

"Thanks, Joe. I'll read it, but no promises. Good luck with yours,

though. Let me know how it's going." Joe nodded as the two of them got back to work.

By that evening almost everyone in town stood facing their new schoolhouse with a shared sense of pride. Dawson saw Helen Langston, the teacher who would be utilizing the new schoolhouse and went to talk to her. "Thank you so much, Sheriff Nolan," she said as a few tears escaped her eyes. "This is so nice. I didn't know you were planning on making more desks, as well. It'll be so much easier now, for both the children and me. They were packed into the desks pretty close, so this will make it so much easier for them to practice writing and doing their sums."

"Good," he said, and stepped forward, getting everyone's attention. "I'd like to thank everyone for their hard work in getting this schoolhouse built. That includes Joe Pickens, who got us all the lumber; Pete Burgan, who drew up the diagram for the house and oversaw the building of it; Ralph Clemons who forged all the nails we used; Lloyd Baker, who was in charge of making the desks; to all you men and boys who came out and helped, and most of all, all you women who fed us," he concluded with a chuckle. Everyone applauded before turning to talk with friends and neighbors as they gathered their things to go home.



SHERIFF NOLAN MADE a final trip around Pine Falls, checking to make sure everything was okay before returning to his own home for the night. He stopped for a moment at the empty house next to his, where his friend, Ernie Rucker, had lived. Although he still wasn't sure what he was going to do with the rest of the money Ernie left the town, he felt good about the new schoolhouse, and was sure Ernie would have approved of some of the money being used to build it.

He went on into his home and stoked up the fire in the stove. It was spring and although it was getting warmer, it was still chilly in

the evenings, and the fire would feel good. He heated up the left-overs some of the ladies had sent home with him, and sat down, thinking over the day, happy with all they'd accomplished.

He remembered the paper Joe had given him and pulled it out. It wasn't often Pine Falls got a newspaper, so he settled in, eager to see what all was going on in the world outside of their little town. He came across the story Joe was talking about, and when he read it he had to agree it sounded like it had worked out well for both of them. They seemed to be very happy.

There was information after the story about how to write an ad for a mail order bride if a man were interested. It suggested he be honest and tell a little bit about himself and what he was looking for in a bride. That sounded plain crazy to Joe. Didn't every man look for the same thing in a wife; a gentle woman to be a companion, who was waiting for him at the end of the day?

As he read further, though, he was surprised to find that wasn't always the case. It gave a few examples of ads that had been successful in finding a mail order bride, and he was surprised, to say the least. One man had lost his wife to influenza and was looking for someone that could be a mother to his six children, three of which were girls that needed a lady's influence. Another was looking for a lady to cook and clean, but he also needed her to be strong enough to help on his farm. Another was looking for a wife that could read and write, as he'd never learned how, and needed someone to read contracts to him before he signed them.

He put mail order brides out of his mind as he turned the page and read on, interested in all the changes that were taking place in that part of the country. There were stories talking about how different little towns were growing now because of the arrival of the train. It was only a couple of hours by horse from Pine Falls to the nearest train station, and the people of Pine Falls were hoping their little town would grow, as well.

They were doing okay, but it would be good if the town grew a little. The general store could carry more items so people would

have a few more choices when they shopped, and it would benefit the hotel. There was a large number of single men in town who ate in the two restaurants often, and for them, including himself, having another restaurant open would give them another option. As the town grew, he knew more stores and services would open up, as well. It was interesting reading about how other small towns were growing, and he hoped Pine Falls would soon be among them.

He glanced at the last page, but it was local news, telling who had a new baby, or whose family was visiting from back east. He was laying the paper aside when he noticed a small ad. He picked the paper back up and read it, then read it again. It was from a lady in a town just outside of Philadelphia, and it was looking for men wanting mail order brides. That got his attention, since it was generally a man that placed the ad, looking for a mail order bride.

This was totally different, in several ways. Apparently the young lady placing this ad, Miss Cecelia Adams, was one of eight ladies age seventeen or over who had been living in an orphanage. The building burned down, and the eight of them had nowhere to go. None of them had family. Several families in the area had taken them in, but only on a temporary basis. She was asking for anything anyone could offer. They were hoping to become mail order brides or were willing to work if someone had a reputable job to offer and a boarding house or someplace to stay.

He paused a moment while he thought about the young ladies and the situation they were in. His heart went out to them. It would be bad enough to lose your family and grow up in an orphanage, but to then lose that would be devastating. Then a crazy thought crossed his mind. That's what he could spend the trust money on. It would cost a fair amount for a train ticket and stagecoach ticket for all eight of them to come to Pine Falls, but there was more than enough in the trust to cover it. Once they got here they could stay in Ernie's house.

The more he thought about this idea, the more he liked it. The whole thing made sense. With only six or seven ladies living in Pine

Falls now it was difficult to find people to fill certain positions in town. Miss Adams said they were all willing to work if they could find reputable employment. Tom Wakefield had been looking for someone to help him at the general store. Lenore Atkins was the only seamstress in Pine Falls and was in high demand. Bertha at the restaurant was always looking for someone to help her serve her food and fill coffee cups. Many of the single men wished there was someone they could hire to wash their clothes.

That got him thinking. If he could put the ladies up in Ernie's old house and three or four of them were willing and able to get employment at these or other openings, once they got settled in they would be able to support themselves.

He was sure the town would welcome the ladies. While they had been working on the schoolhouse several men heard about Joe and his search for a mail order bride. Several of them had asked questions about it, showing some interest. Not only would these ladies be able to fill positions Bertha and Lenore and others needed, but they would be possible wives for men looking to get married. The town could sponsor a dance or two, maybe a picnic to get people together so everyone, including men looking for a wife, could meet the ladies.

He knew it would also make it easier for the women of Pine Falls the next time they had something like the raising of the schoolhouse. Five ladies banded together to make the meal for all the men, while the other lady and a couple of older girls watched all the children. They all worked hard for two days to make enough food for everyone, including all the bread, pies and other desserts. Having several more sets of hands to help with things like that would be very helpful.

He spent the rest of his evening thinking about this wild idea. By the time he went to bed he truly believed that not only could this work, but it would be very beneficial for the town. Isn't that what he was supposed to use the trust from Ernie for -- something that would be beneficial to the town?