

CHAPTER 1



BIG ROCK, WYOMING TERRITORY

"Ladies, ladies," Harriet Smithers said before she blew the whistle to call to order this month's meeting of the Big Rock Ladies' Aid Society. "Our meeting this month is more than timely! Today, I got an urgent message from Judge Wilson in Rawlins. He's read about our mail order bride success. Listen closely now. He's got a girl just turning eighteen, coming in front of him for theft and it's a repeat offense. Nothing seems to stop her. But, the poor girl, she's lost her father and has been having to forage for food. Now, she's taken to stealing."

Harriet had the rapt attention of everyone there.

"She's been turned out of her rooms for non-payment. She's something of a wild child, he said. Unkempt, and wears boys' clothes. This is the girl's fourth time in front of him, and he's loathe to send a girl of such tender years to prison. He asked me if we could find her a husband here in Big Rock." Harriet paused for effect. "I told him we could, and to send her on."

There were murmurs, some quite loud. "Who do you have in mind for her?"

"I'd like to get your ideas about that. The judge said she definitely needs a man with, and I quote," she looked at the paper in her hand, "a very firm hand and a strap in the other one."

"Two orders of business on this. The first is who will offer their home to her until we get her married off, and the second thing is which of our bachelors might make a good match for her?"

"I'll check with Elliott, but we have room for her," Sadie Larkin said. Her husband was the town doctor.

"We have a couple of extra rooms, too, if it's all right with Aaron," Evie said. Evie's husband was the deputy, Aaron Glover.

"Well, if neither of them can do it, I'm sure we can," said Mrs. Copperfield, the Methodist minister's wife. "I don't think Willis would hesitate to swing a strap until such a time as we get her married."

"Perfect."

"Don't forget we live right behind the jail," Evie said, chuckling. "Aaron can keep her in line just by threatening to throw her in a cell until he can send her back to the judge in Rawlins."

"All right, Evie, talk to Aaron and see what he says. Let me know as soon as you know he consents. Now, can any of you think of any men who would be up to the task?"

Shirley Keller, who owned the general store with her husband, Clint, said, "I believe I know every man in town. I don't know of a one who'd back down from the challenge of a wayward girl. One good candidate would be Jake Jernigan, that young man with the ranch out on the Separation trail northwest of town. He's by himself now since his dad died. I asked him once why he wasn't married, and he said he wanted to marry, but there weren't any young ladies in town."

"It might be a stretch to call Ruby a lady, but I understand his position," Harriet said.

Belle Clark raised her hand. Belle and her husband, Willard,

owned the Belle-Air copper mine. "There are about a half-dozen men who work at the mine who would love to get married. Maybe even more. I can guarantee our mineworkers would be fully capable of taking a troublemaking teenager in hand. They'd nip that behavior in the bud."

"One of the carpenters who works with Angus is interested, too, Caine McKelvey," said Nessa Kelly. Her husband, Angus, co-owned the sawmill and the furniture factory in town.

"All right, ladies, I have these suggestions and names. Belle, tomorrow, I'll come by the mine at the end of shift and you can point out the men who might be interested. I need to talk to them. I'll track down Jake and Caine myself and see if they're interested in meeting Ruby. I'll be on the lookout for others, too."



Rawlins

"What is your plea, Mr. Burman?" the judge asked.

Mr. Burman looked at his attorney. "He says I should say not guilty."

"Always good to listen to your attorney," Judge Wilson said with no little sarcasm.

The door opened and the telegrapher's assistant rushed in and handed something to the judge, then retreated. The judge opened the envelope and pulled out the wire.

SEND her on STOP We'll find her a husband STOP Expect her on next stage STOP Harriet Smithers

JUDGE WILSON SMILED BROADLY and got back to the work at hand. "All right, Mr. Burman, court date next Thursday." He pounded his gavel. "Next."

"Ruby Rankin, Judge," the bailiff announced as the same lawyer who represented Mr. Burman dragged Ruby up out of her seat. "Theft of property."

The judge took off his eyeglasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose in a look of frustration. "How are you going to plead this time?"

"I was framed," the unkempt young woman said, frowning in resentment.

"Of course, you were. I believe this is what, the fourth or fifth time someone framed you?"

"I can't help it if somebody's out to get me."

"Who would this person be, Ruby? And how did they plant the stolen items on you? Every single time?"

Ruby took a deep breath and held up her chin. "They're obviously very smart. That's more than I can say for the law, or they'd have found them by now and I wouldn't be here."

Judge Wilson chuckled under his breath. "Clever. Now, what is your plea, Ruby?"

"I told you I didn't do it."

He turned to the woman, who took notes of the proceedings. "Please enter that as a not guilty plea."

"Ruby, I told you last time to look for a job. What happened with that?"

She paused and looked a little ashamed. Her hands came together in front of her, her fingers fiddling with the fingers of the other hand. "Nobody would hire me."

The judge took a long look at the girl. There was a smudge of dirt on her cheek. Her hair was tangled and hung loose. She wore a man's shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and the britches she wore looked like they belonged on a prepubescent boy. His heart went out to her.

"Do you have any relatives, Ruby?"

"No, sir. Pa was the last of his line. Don't know about my ma's family. I never knew her since she died when I was a baby."

"Where have you been living since your pa died?"

"In a barn," she said hesitantly.

"Whose barn?"

"I'd rather not say."

"Why?"

"Because they don't know I'm living in it."

The judge couldn't help but laugh at that. But his laughter died down and he looked at Ruby long enough for her to become uncomfortable and the rest of the onlookers to wonder what his next words would be.

"Ruby, I believe you're a smart girl. A resourceful one, even if your resources aren't always lawful. It's my opinion that putting you in jail for a few days one more time isn't going to make a lick of difference. You'll just go back to stealing. I know the position you're in and that you need to eat, but I have to uphold the law. People think the law is here to punish people, and it is, but we need to temper that punishment with common sense. I believe it's my job to do what I can to curtail crime, to do what I can to stop people from committing them. Maybe that means stopping people from *having* to commit them, when I can find a way to do that."

Ruby hadn't heard this many words from the judge on any of her previous visits to the court. She had no idea what he would say next. Did he have some way to keep her from having to steal her food?

"You've stood before me several times for theft. I could sentence you to a year in jail, even more than that."

"Judge, please, it wasn't that—"

He cut her off, "But I won't. I have something else in mind that I believe will turn your life around. Have you ever been to Big Rock?"

She eyed him quizzically. "No, sir. I know it's south of here."

"Yes, it's just a couple of days away. The town has grown, almost doubled, in the last two or three years. It's mostly men who have

moved in because of the mine and the other businesses that have sprung up. These men want wives."

Her eyes widened and his narrowed.

"Ruby, some people in that town have set up a mail order bride enterprise and it's been quite successful at matching young ladies to suitable husbands."

Ruby began slowly shaking her head in a clear negative reaction.

"I want to send you to Big Rock. I have confirmation and a promise from them that they'll support you until they find a husband for you."

"You can't make me marry someone against my will!"

"I hope it won't come to that. There are many men in that town who are looking for a wife. They want to settle down, start families, find a companion in life. If you do your part, Ruby, my hope is that you will find partner you can love and spend the rest of your life with."

"But I don't need a man. Pa always said so. He said they're mostly no good anyway."

That gave the judge a little bit of insight.

"It's true that some people go their whole lives without marriage. I wonder how lonely they must be. I married my Peggy twenty-five years ago, and can't imagine my life without her. I have daughters, too. I may have told them a few times that some men weren't worth their time, just like your pa told you. But think about this, Ruby. Even your pa loved a woman so much he married her. Don't you believe he'd want that kind of happiness for you?"

Ruby hesitated. "I suppose so."

"I'm sure he did. You're almost eighteen. You will be eighteen by the time you get to Big Rock. Some girls have wed sooner than that, some aren't ready. Your pa probably just didn't want to see you married off quite so young. Let's face it, you've seen a lot in your young life. I suspect you've had to mature more than others your age. I think you're ready for a step like marriage. Will you agree

with me that such a change in your life could change it for the better?"

She hesitated. This was all such a surprise; all she'd expected to happen was that she'd spend a day or two in the jail. They knew her there and treated her well enough, keeping her away from other prisoners' cells. And they fed her.

"Maybe it could. What if I don't want to marry the man?"

"There are dozens in that town. If you can't find a suitable man in that many, then you have other problems, girl. But make no mistake, if you don't marry within a month, I'll have you back here and you'll face time in the women's section of the territorial prison. Trust me, you don't want that. If you try to run away, the same thing will happen. I'm in touch with the people running the mail order bride program. I'm in touch with the law there, too. So tell me now, Ruby, what is your choice? Will you marry, or should I send you on to the prison in Laramie right now?"

Ruby let out a sigh of resignation. "I'll marry," she said. "But I'm not happy about it."

The judge nodded, and even the onlookers in the courtroom seemed to have a collective relieved smile.

"Well, I'm certain you'll be happy later, if you let yourself. Ruby, I want you to understand fully what your situation is. Your cooperation isn't optional. I expect you to go to Big Rock willingly. I expect you to treat your sponsors and the law there with respect and appreciation. I expect you to do as you're told by them. I expect you to give your prospective husbands a fair chance. Follow my directions, or you'll find yourself in Laramie behind bars. Do you agree to my terms?"

Ruby pouted a little, but she answered, "Yes." Her tone was mildly peeved.

"I'm going to ask my bailiff and his wife, who just happens to be my court reporter here, Mrs. Mitchell, to accompany you on your trip to Big Rock." He turned to her. "Is that all right with you, Martha?"

Martha's wide eyes belied her calm, but she nodded her assent.

"The stage leaves the day after tomorrow. Today, I'm going to ask Mrs. Mitchell to buy you two new dresses and whatever else you need, at the court's expense. You'll spend the nights in the jailhouse, but during the day while you're shopping and preparing for the trip, you'll be under the watchful protection of the bailiff and Mrs. Mitchell."

He wrapped up the details, impressed upon Ruby the consequences of her not following instructions, then pounded his gavel.

"Adjourned!"