

## CHAPTER 1



Sheriff Dawson Nolan always paid close attention to his lovely wife, Cecelia, and didn't miss much. He often knew and anticipated what her reaction to something would be, which was why it didn't surprise him much when he saw a tear escape her eye and start trickling down her cheek. He couldn't stop a small smile when he watched her reach into her pocket and pull out the extra handkerchief he'd put in her hands right before they started up the aisle with her on his arm fifteen minutes ago.

Their eyes met and held for several moments, both of them thinking back to the four short months ago when they stood in front of the preacher repeating their vows. At that time her best friend, Rose Kincaid, had stood next to her and his best friend, Fred Miller, was next to him. Now here they were, standing next to them again, with the roles reversed. Fred and Rose were saying their vows, and he'd known it would bring tears to his lovely wife's eyes.

He looked out into the congregation and had to smile yet again. Joe Pickens, who sat in the front row, handed a hankie to his fiancée, Lizzie Graber, who also had a few tears. Looking on down the bench past them, Pete Burgan was handing Sally Graham a

hankie, as well. Sitting on the pew next to them, Ella Trumble was blotting her eyes, as well, as Frank Hanley casually put his arm around her shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. Ralph Clemons was handing Goldie Compton a hankie. Next to Goldie was Anna, who was also wiping her eyes.

While Fred and Rose spoke their vows, Dawson took a moment to think back on the last year or so. His friend and neighbor, Ernie, had passed away and left his house and money to the town, with the instruction that Dawson was to spend it in a way that would benefit the community. He'd used some of it to build a school, since they had outgrown the rather small room above the church, and buy some books for the school. He'd struggled over what to do with the rest of the money until he saw an ad placed by Cecelia.

She and six other ladies had grown up in an orphanage. When they'd become of age, they had nowhere to go and were living at the orphanage, working there for nothing more than room and board. Tragically, the orphanage burned to the ground, leaving them nowhere to live. The younger residents were transferred to another orphanage in another town, but the ladies that were of age were left homeless.

Like many small frontier towns, Pine Falls had been struggling with a shortage of women. Men often traveled west to claim land for farming, or mine for gold or silver, hoping to strike it rich. A few men were married when they went west, but by far the majority was single. That left a shortage of women, not only for the single men looking to get married, but also to fulfill such jobs as seamstress, or running a restaurant for the men to eat.

When Dawson saw the ad in the paper, he decided having more ladies in Pine Falls would benefit the whole town. The few ladies in town got along well, but often longed for more women to visit with. He used money from the trust to bring the seven ladies to Pine Falls. They lived in Ernie's house next door to Dawson's, and were happy to fill the open employment positions in town to earn money to live.

It had worked out well for everyone, especially himself, as he saw it. When he brought the ladies to Pine Falls, he had no intention of courting any of them. He was busy being the sheriff, and knew he would have to keep an eye on the ladies to keep them safe in this strange place. They were from Philadelphia, which was very different from the small rural town of Pine Falls, Nebraska. The ladies settled in nicely, quickly becoming friends with the few women already living there. It didn't take long for single men to start courting them.

The biggest surprise to Dawson was how close he and Cecelia had become through the letters they sent back and forth, arranging the move. She'd caught his interest right from the first letter she sent. Before ever meeting her, he knew there was nothing normal about this little lady, which instantly earned his respect. Not only did she have the gumption to place the ad, but it became clear to him early on that she was the spokesperson for all of them. By the time the ladies arrived, the two of them had already begun forming feelings for each other.

When they finally met, he felt she was the most beautiful lady he'd ever seen, though it was easy to see she had no idea how beautiful she was. As they got to know each other better and he saw little snippets as to what it was like for her growing up in the orphanage, his respect for her grew. There was nothing average about her childhood, but it hadn't prevented her from becoming a well-liked, well-rounded adult. The friendship they'd developed while exchanging letters had grown quickly, and they'd been married just a few months ago. Now here they were, watching Rose and Fred exchange vows.

Joe Pickens, who ran the sawmill in town, had recently asked Lizzie to marry him. She had accepted, and they would soon be witnessing another wedding. Dawson had a feeling it wouldn't be long before Pete Burgan, who built furniture and houses for the town, would propose to Sally. He also suspected Frank Hanley and Ella Trumble would soon be announcing their wedding plans.

Ralph Clemons, the town's blacksmith, has been seeing Goldie Compton for a little while now, so they might not be far behind them. The only one not seeing anyone on a steady basis was Anna Cultrip. Several men were interested, but although she'd gone to share a meal with each of them, she hadn't settled down with one in particular yet.

Besides being good for the single men in town, the ladies had made life better in Pine Falls for everyone. Cecelia had taken a job helping Tom Wakefield in the general store. The ladies in town were thrilled when Tom started taking her suggestions for things to order in for the ladies. They had a nicer selection of fabrics now, and a few other things the ladies appreciated.

Another thing the town desperately needed was someone to help Lenore, the town's only seamstress. The married ladies made clothes for themselves and their families, but barely had time to make what they needed, let alone for anyone else. They often wished Lenore had time to help them, but she was kept busy by single men. They had to rely on ready-made shirts and pants from the general store, which weren't exactly what they wanted. They usually didn't fit quite right, and the men often wanted something they couldn't get in the ready made items, like larger pockets or longer sleeves.

Anna and Goldie were good hands at sewing and took positions helping Lenore, which everyone in town appreciated. Rose took a position helping Cyrus, who ran the telegraph office and put out the local newspaper. With her help, the paper now came out weekly, rather than haphazardly, as he had the time. Sally was helping Bertha at the restaurant, and Lizzie and Ella had started a laundry service. The single men, especially the local miners, were very appreciative of being able to drop their dirty clothes off on their way to work, and picking them back up in the evening, clean. Several people in town were thankful for that, as some of the men tended to wear their clothes much longer than they should have, but were too busy, or plain hated washing their clothes themselves.

Dawson's attention was brought back to the present as the preacher started the portion of the ceremony where they said their vows. He'd barely begun before Andy Swartz, Dawson's deputy, came in the side door of the church and walked hurriedly over to the sheriff, even as the preacher gave him a pointed look, but continued on with the ceremony. He spoke merely a few hurried words, and the two men promptly left, leaving everyone looking around, obviously confused.

The preacher glanced at Cecelia, who was looking worried and rather pale, then gave a quick glance at the side door the two men hurried out of, but quickly looked back to the bride and groom, and continued with the ceremony. He'd barely found his place and begun again when the unmistakable sound of a gunshot rang out. Everyone was instantly quiet and all heads turned toward the back of the building. When there was no shouting or other noise coming from outside, the preacher cleared his throat, bringing the attention back to him, and once again began where he'd left off.

Before he'd finished his first sentence there was a second gunshot. This time there was no silence; things happened quickly. Fred turned toward the back door, but before he took more than a step or two, he heard a noise and turned back toward the front. Reverend Hart had begun praying, and Cecelia had fainted. Rose was next to her, her wide eyes and a scared expression shifting between her best friend on the floor and the man she was about to marry. Fred paused long enough for his eyes to find Dr. Wilson, sitting a couple rows back. "Doc, go help Rose," he yelled as he ran to the back of the church. By the time he got to the door, two other men joined him and they cautiously opened the door, looked around and ran outside.

Dr. Wilson ran to the front and knelt down next to Rose, who was patting Cecelia's hand and urging her to wake up. He checked to be sure she hadn't been injured when she fell, and was glad when he found no obvious injuries or bumps on her head.

While they tended to Cecelia, Fred saw Dawson and Andy with

their guns trained on a man lying in the street, and hurried to them, the other two men close behind. The man had obviously been shot. As Fred got closer he recognized him as George Burke, the leader of a group of men who had tried to overtake the stagecoach when the ladies first came to Pine Falls. Fortunately, Dawson, Fred and a couple of other men from Pine Falls had accompanied the stagecoach, and when Burke and his gang attacked, they were able to overtake them. Two were killed, and Burke and two other men went to prison. Burke always said he had his eye on Cecelia and would be back to claim his woman and get revenge on the sheriff.

As Fred got to him, Burke opened his eyes and looked up at Dawson. He spoke so soft it was barely over a whisper. "Damn you, Sheriff. I had plans for that little lady later tonight, after I killed you for sending me to prison." As soon as he finished speaking his eyes closed, and it was apparent to everyone standing there that he'd died.

It took the stunned men standing around him a few minutes to digest what had just happened. Eventually, Dawson spoke up. "Andy, thank you for getting me."

"I was standing watch in town, like you asked. When a man came riding in yelling for the sheriff, I thought it sounded like him, so I knew you would want to know about it right away. I hated to interrupt the ceremony, but—"

"No, you did the right thing," Dawson assured him. "If he wouldn't have found me he probably would have started going into buildings looking for people. Most businesses have a sign on the door saying closed for the wedding, so I was afraid he'd head to the church, looking for the wedding. I came out right away because I certainly didn't want him going there, with everyone crowded inside."

"Hard telling what he would have done then," Fred said. "Thank you, Andy, for preventing that."

"You're certainly welcome. I'm sorry I interrupted." He smiled as

he said, "It certainly gave you a little something extra to remember about your wedding day."

Fred laughed and nodded in agreement. "It'll give us a good story to tell our grandkids some day."

"It sure will," Dawson agreed, and turned back to Andy. "Would you mind getting someone to help, and taking him to the undertaker? Fred and I have a wedding to get back to."

"Of course," Andy said. He took a better look at Dawson and shook his head. "You may want to brush yourself off a bit first, though. When he fired at you and you dropped to the ground and rolled, you got a bit dirty."

Dawson looked down at himself and sighed. "You're right." He brushed some of the dirt off.

"What happened?" Fred asked.

"When I saw him ride into town, he had his gun drawn and was yelling for the sheriff," Andy said. "I thought it sounded like Burke, so I went and told Dawson. When we got back out here, Burke fired a shot at him as soon as he saw him. He didn't say a word, just fired off a shot. We both dropped to the ground and rolled to the general store. We weren't sure where he was going, so we decided we had to look out from both sides of the building and find out where he was. I had just gotten to the other side and looked around the corner, and saw Burke aiming his gun again at Dawson. I was lifting my gun to fire when I heard Dawson fire a shot. That's all it took."

"I'm glad you're both okay," Fred said.

"As am I," Dawson said with a bit of a smile. "Now, can you help me brush more of this dirt off? I don't think Rose or Cecelia will either one be real impressed if they see me like this."

"I'm not so sure of that," Fred said. "I think they'll both be happy to see you alive and well." He did as asked, though, and brushed a bunch of dirt off Dawson before they headed back to the church.

When they walked in the door at the back of the church a few minutes later there was a collective sigh from everyone, followed

by applause, and lots of questions. Dawson didn't hear much of it, though. As soon as he saw his wife lying on the floor at the front of the church, with Dr. Wilson over her, he concentrated on nothing but making his way to her. The applause when the men walked in brought her back, and by the time he got to the front, she was opening her eyes and Dr. Wilson was helping her sit up.

She looked confused, but quickly found Dawson. She reached toward him as he rushed to her, his concern obvious. "Cecelia, are you okay? What happened?"

"I'm not sure. I saw you hurry outside, then I heard some gunshots. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, honey."

By that time half of the congregation had gathered around them, asking questions. They not only wanted to know what had happened outside, but were concerned about Cecelia. She'd become accepted and loved by the people of Pine Falls.

Once Dawson was satisfied his wife was okay and had simply fainted out of worry over him, he tried to answer everyone's questions quickly so they could get back to his best friend's wedding. He stood and addressed the crowd. "Everything is okay now," he tried to assure them. "George Burke escaped from prison and came back here, planning to seek revenge."

He paused at the collective gasp, and soon heard several questions and lots of concern about their safety, so he explained a bit further. "Everyone can rest, he won't be bothering anyone again, here or anywhere else." As that information settled in, some people gasped, and some sounded relieved and glad. "I got a telegram yesterday afternoon from the federal prison, warning me he had escaped. They had some rangers attempting to track him, but they thought he might head here, since he felt it was only because of me that he was sent to prison."

That got several people talking, upset that he blamed Dawson instead of himself. "Many criminals do that; blame everyone but themselves for the trouble they get themselves into. That's why



they sent me a telegram, warning me of his escape. I told Deputy Swartz about it so we could be ready. They didn't think he'd make it here before this evening at the earliest, or more likely sometime tomorrow. Andy volunteered to stay outside and watch out for him this morning, just in case. I'm certainly thankful he did. However, it's all over now, so I think we need to get back to what brought us all here. There's certainly been nothing average about this wedding so far, but let's try to correct that."

People heartily agreed, with some chuckling, some applauding, and everyone returned to their seats. While everyone was doing that, Dawson talked to Dr. Wilson about his wife. The doctor suggested she wasn't ready yet to be standing, so with Fred and Rose's approval, he got two chairs and set them next to the bride and groom. He helped Cecelia up and over to one, and once she was settled in, he sat next to her, taking her hand in his for support.

Reverend Hart started the ceremony again, and soon proudly pronounced them married and presented Mr. and Mrs. Fred Miller, as everyone applauded. After Fred led his new wife down the aisle, Dawson helped Cecelia stand and kept an arm around her waist as he escorted her to the back of the church, as well. Cecelia had Rose in her arms, hugging her. She reached up to kiss Fred, but warned him, "You take good care of my best friend."

Although she was smiling, Fred knew she was serious. "I certainly will," he assured her.

Dawson smiled at the exchange and leaned down to kiss Rose on her cheek before shaking Fred's hand. "Congratulations to both of you." He got a chair for his wife to sit in, but wasn't a bit surprised when she stayed standing as people filed through, with excitement and kind words for all four of them.

Lenore addressed Rose and Cecelia as she went through the line. "Congratulations, Rose. Ladies, the wedding was simply beautiful." She stopped a moment to talk quietly just to Cecelia. "We were all so impressed with the decorations you ladies made for your wedding, and are so glad you allowed us to help make similar

ones for Rose's wedding. The quilt squares are so beautiful on the tables with jars of colorful stones and dried flowers placed on them."

"Thank you."

"We're also very thankful you offered to teach us how to quilt. I've sewn since I was little, but never did any quilting. We've all had such a good time learning how and making these squares for her wedding. Our afternoons of getting together to visit and quilt have been fabulous, even if they are few and far between."

"It was our pleasure to teach everyone. We've had such a good time when we've been able to get together, too. It's given us a chance to get to know all you wonderful ladies better. Remember, we're getting together this Friday evening here at the church to sew the squares together."

"Oh, I'll be there. I think that's such a wonderful thing. Using them to decorate the church for the wedding was beautiful. Sewing them together while they're on their honeymoon is even better. Now when they get back they'll have a beautiful quilt for their bed."

"I didn't know they were going to sew them together after my wedding," Cecelia said. "I planned on keeping the squares to decorate our house, and as a memento. When they surprised me with the quilt as a gift, I was shocked. I agree with you, it's a wonderful idea. I'm so proud of that quilt; I almost hate to use it on our bed. It's so full of good memories."

"And now all of us ladies get to participate in it, and we're all very thankful for that opportunity. I think you've started a Pine Falls wedding tradition." She moved along so she didn't hold the line up, but Cecelia heard similar comments from several other ladies. She agreed; it was a nice tradition.

It wasn't long before things got busy at the church, as men started rearranging everything to make room for the tables and benches. Many of the women were upstairs in the small room above the church, getting the food ready for everyone to go through the line and fill their plates, just as they'd done at Dawson

and Cecelia's wedding. The rest of the day was filled with nothing but fun, plain and simple. Everyone had a good time, and once again, Cecelia understood why weddings were such a big thing in Pine Falls. The ladies all joined in and cooked a big meal, with a lot of special dishes. Everyone took a rare day off to celebrate with the couple, and enjoy a full day of eating and visiting.

When people started leaving to go home and do their evening chores, Cecelia and the others started cleaning up. When the church was clean and put back to normal, ready for services the next morning, Dawson checked to be sure the other five ladies living next door to him had a way home. He'd watched out for all of them from the time they first moved in, even though it wasn't really necessary any longer. They all looked out for each other. Although all of the ladies except Anna had been seeing a man for a while, each of them had invited her to go with them.

Once Dawson knew that was taken care of, he put the dishes they'd brought full of food in the buggy while his wife made one last check to be sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Once she was satisfied, he helped her up into the buggy. On their way home they talked about how well the day had gone. "I'm proud of you, honey," Dawson said.

"For what?"

"I know all seven of you ladies are pretty independent, but as a group the others have always looked to you to lead them. I wondered if once you got married they would still do that, and in a way they still do."

"Do you think?" Cecelia seemed surprised. "I thought they've started talking things over and making decisions without me."

Dawson looked down, detecting something in her voice that concerned him a bit. "Cecelia, are you feeling left out?"

"Maybe a little," she admitted. "I mean, not really left out, but they don't really rely on me as much as they did, and -"

When she paused, he squeezed her hand. "And you miss it?"

She took some time to think before answering. "I guess maybe I

do," she admitted, "but I shouldn't. I mean, I have a husband now that I love very much, and our own home. I also have employment at the general store that I love, so my life is full. I hope they all have the same thing some day."

"That doesn't mean a part of you can't still miss knowing someone relies on you. That's a good feeling, even if it does come with responsibility."

"What do you mean, responsibility?"

"I know you rely on me some." He chuckled as he added, "Not as much as I'd like sometimes, but I know you rely on me some, and I like that feeling. I try hard to always be there for you, no matter what you need. It may be as simple as giving you a hankie for when your eyes tear up when you see your best friend get married, or it may be protecting you from wild critters when we go walking in the woods, or keeping a fire going in the winter to keep our home warm. Sometimes it's something as simple as giving you my honest opinion about something. Whatever it is, it makes me feel good knowing you trust me enough to rely on me for those things. I can understand why you would miss that feeling."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. I guess it does feel good knowing they trust me."

"Of course it does. And they still do trust you. It's good they're all close enough to help each other with anything that comes up, but they're still seeking your opinion and advice on big things. They trust you a great deal, and always will. Even though you're not living with them now, you're next door and they don't hesitate to come talk to you. You led them through Rose's wedding. That's actually what I was congratulating you for. I know you took the lead in that, and once again, the wedding was perfect. Everything went real well and everyone there had a good time, and there was plenty of good food."

"Thank you. It was much easier this time since she liked our wedding and wanted much of the same thing. We'd already done it all once." She was quiet for several minutes, and he could tell she

was deep in thought, so he gave her the time she needed to think. “Things will be starting to change from here on out, won't they?”

Thinking he had a pretty good idea what she was referring to, he nodded his head. “Yes, I think they probably will. If you'd like to talk about it, I have a couple of thoughts on it myself.”