

## Chapter One

Frank looked out over the dry desert landscape surrounding him and wiped his sweaty brow with the back of his wrist as colorful wildflowers waved in the light breeze outside Silver Lake's only livery stable. The prepossessing nineteen-year-old was deep in thought when he heard his grandfather's boots shuffle through the hay. Frank had been working hard since early sunrise that morning. Spot wagged his tail and followed close behind Grandfather, hoping for a friendly pat.

Birds chattered up in the rafters, snug in their nests. Frank grabbed his slouch cowboy hat off the wood counter, waiting to hear what his grandfather was going to say, and pulled off his dingy mustard yellow work gloves that smelled like horsehair, grain, and leather. He watched patiently as his grandfather inspected the job.

"Lad, if yur gonna make dat broodmare's shoe fit right, ye've ter nail it down so it's tighter," Grandfather spit out while puffing on his ancient tobacco pipe and finished up walking around the horse, mumbling. Spot, the black and white Border Collie, gave up and got nestled on his blanket as he watched little barn mice dash in and out of holes. His ears perked up as Grandfather continued, getting louder. "Me hell! 'Tis 'otter in 'ere than a whorehouse on nickel noight!" George swiped at the flies with his hat before running his hand through his long dark gray hair.

Frank chuckled lightly trying not to encourage his granddad. "You know old man, Grandma would give you hell if she were to hear you." Grandfather Duncan waved off his comment, smiling, and was back to hitching up a carriage for some new customers coming through town when he stopped and looked over to where Spot was sitting.

The dog's ears perked up, and soon he was crouched down, warning them with a low growl which was immediately followed by a loud vicious bark that startled Frank. With a stiff neck and strained muscles, Frank glanced at his grandfather, then followed the dog's eyes outside where Thunder Cloud sat stone cold on his beautiful Chestnut horse in a grove of Oregon White Oak trees. It was all too familiar. Frank instinctively lowered his hand to the Colt Navy .36 he kept at his hip and cleared his throat.

Before George Duncan knew it, he was locking eyes with Frank, telling him put his gun away, Thunder Cloud would never do anything to hurt either one of them. Sure as the sun was scorching hot he knew his word to be true. George Duncan trusted that the leader would never harm either him or his grandson; however, he wasn't too sure he could say the same about the others. It was the two brothers that followed

behind their older brother that worried him. Before the men could blink or say any more, Thunder Cloud was already gone.

"How long you spec't they'd been there watching?" Frank asked his grandfather, removing his hat and wiping his forehead again.

"Oi not long son. Dis 'ere is thyr land though. Thy alwus do show up whaen ye ain't watchin.'" His spunky old Irish grandfather walked over to the well where he pulled up some cool water and splashed it on his warm face and neck. George took out his blue bandana and dried himself off then shoved it back in his pocket. "I speck it's 'is way o' saying 'ello to us." He smiled and went back to work, remembering what an honest, hard worker Thunder Cloud was after the Modoc war years ago when he offered him work on his farm. It was the least George could do for the poor lad. He was just a kid then, when the war took everything he loved away from him and his family.

George never forgot that beautiful horse Thunder Cloud still rode. He remembered the spring when she was born. It was the day before the trial started for Thunder Cloud's cousin, Captain Jack. Yes, George would know that horse anywhere, with her unique white lightning bolt down her nose and beautiful shiny auburn coat that was a striking reddish-brown in the sun.

Finally done with his mare's shoe, Frank pulled out his pocket watch, flipping open the silver-plated cover. It was time to hitch up the wagon and head to town for supplies. His lungs tightened with excitement flooding the very veins that ran to his heart when he thought about the chance of seeing *her* today.

Bending to pick up the grain sacks, Granddad yelled out, "Be back before we's is s'pected fur dinner, yer 'ear?" trying to insult Frank, knowing he would take his time if that darling new gal that just moved to town was milling around Silver Lake. "I'll finish up 'ere an git de 'orses ready for de morning's customers, aye?"

Frank pulled the ladle off the hook and took a drink letting water run down his chin wetting his shirt before he nodded to his granddad that he heard him.

Frank had always possessed a natural charm and pleasant personality. It showed in his easy-going behavior, always enjoying the good things in life by showing respect for everyone around him. Being over six feet tall, he had a lean muscular frame and natural wavy brown hair that was parted on the right side. Sparkling happy blue eyes showed the soul of a tender, caring person inside.

Frank whistled sharp and loud so the old sheep herding dog could hear him. "Come on boy." He helped Spot jump up into the old beat-up wagon. The dog's ears perked up, excited, ready for a ride into town.

Duncan & Sons Livery Stable was just a half a mile from town, but George Duncan, who was known by everyone in Silver Lake as Uncle George, knew that his favorite grandson was going to take more time than he should in town. Frank had been distracted all week; he suspected he knew why, but would eventually find out for sure soon enough. He was also pretty sure he knew how Frank's week would end up. He was a lad himself once upon a time, and that new gal who just moved in town from the Willamette Valley was not just a looker but the sweetest little gal he'd ever come across. Frank's grandfather looked up in time to see the horse set off in a slow gallop, jerking the wagon forward and kicking up dust. He swatted at the flies following him around all morning and took a puff on his pipe again.

George Duncan sure did admire and love that grandson of his. He didn't feel that way about all of his grandsons, however. There hadn't been anything but problems with Frank's younger brother, Otto. They were as opposite as night and day. Frank had always been the one Grandpa Duncan compared himself to when he was a lad—jovial, smart, a looker, and witty as hell.



The reins relaxed in Frank's hands, and as the horse strolled along he scanned the horizon. The late June morning sun was quickly heating up the day and adding degrees by the minute. Frank was a few minutes away from arriving at the McFarling's Mercantile in the middle of town, across from the old pioneer cemetery where Canadian Geese hovered watching over the deceased. He got a little nervous thinking about the girl who'd moved to Silver Lake with her family a few weeks before. He wondered where she was this morning, and if he'd get the chance to run into her and say hello. Just to look at her was a gift he was grateful for.

The wagon jumped up and down, creaking at every dirt clod and rock along the way. Spot sat straight up as the two of them pulled up to the front of the hitching post, and the spoiled old dog panted, knowing a treat was waiting for him. "Whoa" Frank called out to his horse, Juniper, who stopped abruptly at his firm, deep, and commanding voice. Pulling the wagon brake back, he stepped down after tying off the reins to the hitching post where the gelding stood patiently waiting.

Two young, dirty little boys in raggedy worn out overalls were throwing a dark leather ball back and forth while waiting for their mother, who was in the store shopping. "Down boy, you know you can't get

out.” Frank patted the top of Spot’s head, calming him. Spot’s eyes, one blue and the other a dark watery brown, eagerly watched the ball bounce over his head.

Frank’s side kick stayed put, but wasn’t too happy about it. He obeyed Frank’s command and laid his head on the light wood seat and whined.

“Mornin, Mrs. Syers,” Frank called out to his elderly neighbor, tipping his hat to her. The old woman looked up under her white flowery hat to see Frank through thick spectacles. “Franky dear,” she croaked, missing a step off the mercantile front porch steps. Old Mrs. Syers just smiled gingerly, showing her four teeth, as he caught her frail body.

He thought to himself how she felt as light as a feather. Mrs. Syers didn’t seem to even notice she’d almost fallen and just kept smiling at Frank and continued walking. He smiled and shook his head. ‘Some things never change,’ he thought to himself when movement in the store caught his attention.

“You boys run along, goes somewheres else to play with that ball,” came the yell from the gruff old storekeeper down the street, Mr. Chrissman, who owned Chrissman Bros. He was out on this hot morning sweeping the boardwalk in front of his store. “Shoo, come on now...git outta here,” swiping the broom at the boys, running them off, his face red and puffy from getting his dander up.

Frank watched as they took off like bats out of hell, running for their lives. Reaching for the door he saw a hand-painted poster that was tacked up. It read:

*A patriotic march*

*Columbus Glory Grand Celebration At Silver Lake*

*July 4th*

*The people of Silver Lake and vicinity will*

*celebrate the nation’s 118th birthday.*

*The mayor and his wife will lead the parade*

*with the Pledge of Allegiance*

Frank saw people moving around inside the store again, and when he realized who they were his heart danced with a thousand butterflies in the pit of his stomach. Several women were standing around looking at new bolts of cloth in back of the store. Frank felt his face get hot, he was getting embarrassed staring through the window like a schoolboy, so he moved quickly before they saw him and opened the heavy door and stepped inside. Forcing the lump in his throat down so he could breathe, he couldn't help but be excited when he saw she was there and just as perfect as the first time he'd laid eyes on her. Each time he looked at her now he was overcome and dumbfounded at her ability to knock the wind out of him better than an enraged bull bucking him off at rodeo time. Pearl, her younger sister, and their mother were busy looking at the new materials Pearl's aunt just brought over. The women noisily prattled like little girls at a tea party in the back of the Mercantile.

The velvety smooth feeling of this imported material was quickly forgotten when they saw the handsome cowboy. Pearl was also taken by surprise, but it was because of her own reaction, not the one he was causing. She had no idea anyone could conjure up excitement in her like that. He was walking towards her now.

Frank smiled when he saw she noticed him. Those curious oval caramel eyes of hers peered right into his soul and melted it.

Pearl's mother was a wise woman and knew she was witnessing something exclusive before her. She was secretly thrilled watching this interaction because her daughter had not wanted to move to Silver Lake. Leaving her life and friends behind in Eugene City frustrated the eighteen-year-old. So this was a wonderful gift, and besides he was a handsome young man that seemed to have a kind, gentle innocence about him.

The women continued to chat among themselves and fumble through all the fun new patterns while Frank pretended to be interested in the books the McFarling's fifteen-year-old daughter was putting on the shelves. Abbie Jean was doing what she could to get Frank's attention, but Frank had already put the book back and was walking away from her towards Pearl when there was a loud crash on the floor. Once everyone gathered their nerves off the hardwood floor, Frank turned to see what had caused it.

"Oh my! Now look what I have done!" Abbie Jean ingenuously exclaimed while gazing at the shards of light pink glass all around her. Though her head was down her eyes were burning into Pearl's soul. Annoyed at the attention Pearl was getting screamed hatred all over the young girl's envious face. Maeve clicked her Irish tongue at her daughter while her husband's face turned a shade of crimson red. Abbie Jean was a spoiled, controlling, and sometimes immature young woman who had been infatuated with Frank and his younger brother, Otto, for as long as she could remember.

Abbie Jean knew by the way Frank looked at Pearl she would have to fight for the attention she'd always craved from him. Pearl was beautiful, Abbie Jean had to admit to herself. But wasn't she told she was a beauty herself? Everyone said they loved her thick black curls that accentuated her clear, pretty, ocean blue eyes. But she was young. Too young for Frank to take any notice of.

Pearl tried to get back to shopping with her sister, giggling to herself as she watched Abbie Jean out of the corner of her eye. She was on to her, knew her little game. Pearl even played it once or twice herself when she was younger. Frank helped clean up the broken glass and gave Abbie Jean a quick hug, telling her she needed to be more careful.

"Oh, why, yes Frankie. I just don't know what got into me. I appreciate your help," she flirtatiously replied.

Young Abbie Jean was a great actress. Years of being the only child in a wealthy home gave her plenty of time to perfect the art of deception. Abbie Jean's father, Liam McFarling, was watching the actions of his daughter, annoyed because she caused them to lose money on that lamp.

Frank tipped his hat to her and then to her father, whom he was always friendly with and liked, before moving towards the back of the store. The old chime hanging on the main entrance door clinked against the glass door window as new customers came into the store. He greeted them, but Frank didn't take notice. His attention was all wrapped up with Pearl, who he was trying to build up enough courage to approach.

Pearl's curious eyes were fixed on Frank. She couldn't look away and didn't even care. Forcing herself to stop. She saw he was smiling at her before he turned to finish up his shopping. Lost in his kind smile, she carefully reached up and touched her hair, making sure the bun was knotted tight on the top of her head. Hearing the chatter at the other end of the store and movement outside, she stood there lost in thought.

'Thank goodness I spent the morning, with Aunt Elizabeth's help, styling my hair in tightly curled French twists.' Not realizing how beautiful she was and how the curls framed her round face perfectly. She was just happy she looked halfway decent, thanks to her favorite aunt, who knew these things were important to a girl of courting age.

Frank put the supplies on his grandfather's credit, said his goodbyes to Liam and Maeve McFarling, and then tipped his hat and nodded to Pearl and the women surrounding her as he exited the store. Jumping down off the south side of the porch, anxious to get out of there, he heard "Oh Frankie!" Running to catch up was Abbie Jean, who confidently swayed her hips as she hurried down the steps towards him. She boldly slipped her hand through his arm he was resting on the hitching post as his other hand pet Spot who was

busy scratching fleas. “Frankie,” she started, twirling her hair while digging her boot into the dirt below, “You are goin’ to the picnic and Fourth of July celebration?”

Frank looked through the buckled glass window to see if Pearl could see him talking before turning his attention back to her. Answering with a red face he replied “You betchya, I’ll see you there, Abbie Jean.” Loose dirt twirled around in a small dirt devil where they stood, dry heat scorching everything in its path. He reached out and gave her chin a brotherly squeeze with the gentle tips of his fingers then finished untying the leather reins from the hitching post, the whole time thinking about Pearl and those beautiful happy eyes that sent shivers up his spine. He led Juniper, pulling the empty wagon to the side of the mercantile where they would load up his supplies for Grandfather Duncan before heading back to the stable.