

PROLOGUE

THE SHARP SMELL of horses drifted through the air, swirling and mingling with the aroma of hot dogs, popcorn, and chuck wagon chili. For six-year-old Dick Gillilan, it was intoxicating. The auction was a monthly event, drawing Wyoming ranchers and farmers from Natrona and the surrounding counties. No one wore their best clothes to the auction, because there were a lot of horses and stepping in manure, whether on accident or on purpose, was inevitable.

Dick's Grandma Frances Gillilan knew this and had dressed him in a pair of worn jeans, an equally worn pair of pointed Acme boots, and his hand-me-down Resistol cowboy hat. Originally, he had pulled his favorite shirt out of the hamper, but when his grandma saw it, she had made him exchange it for one cleaner and, in her words, "less smelly."

Not only was Dick at the auction, he was at the auction with Granddad Delaney Gillilan, and there was little more Dick enjoyed than spending time with his granddad. Like most oilmen, his granddad was strong, tough, and wiry. He'd let Dick hang on his arm, feet dangling in the air, and raise him high, then slowly lower him to the ground, repeating the action over and over again. It was better than any merry-go-round or carnival ride.

Dick spent most of his summers with his grandparents at Poison Spider, an oilfield camp about twenty-five miles due west of Casper, Wyoming. His grandma ran the dining hall, making three meals a day for nearly twenty hands. As much as Dick loved his grandma, he was tied at the ankle to his granddad.

Dick knew everything a six-year-old could know about his granddad. He knew he was an oiler and he could tell you exactly what an oiler did. Whenever asked, and often when not, Dick would explain it was the oiler's job to walk along a very long cable that carried power to the various oil rigs throughout the oil patch and grease each rod that held the cable in the air. He'd act out the process with a garden hose held high above his head, allowing it to slip through his hand as he walked. He'd stop every so often and raise his free hand to his other, pretending to grease the rod.

Dick especially liked to show the part where his granddad had to squeeze himself under a huge horizontal wheel and put grease on a large center pin. He could explain that the grease was used to keep the rotating wheel from getting hot and coming to a sudden stop. He imagined how fun it would be to squeeze himself into the tiny space. He'd demonstrate whenever possible, but often had to settle only for giving a description.

But today Dick's granddad wasn't oiling anything. Today they were at the auction together, in nearby Mills. Dick smiled as he walked alongside his hero. Granddad looked like he always did—khaki work pants that were clean, but somehow always seemed to be covered in a thin layer of dust; a white dress shirt; and a 3X Stetson cowboy hat. Someday, he told Dick, he'd own a 10X Stetson. He said: "You can always judge a man by the quality of the hat and boots he wears."

Whenever Dick got a little too far away, his granddad would take hold of him by the back of the neck. Squeezing just enough to remind him to stay close. His granddad's hands were rough and, while he never tried, Dick knew he could not break free.

His granddad had what was called a cauliflower ear. He once told Dick that he wrestled for money as a young man and the ear was his souvenir. In Dick's opinion, it wasn't much of a souvenir. While most men talked and talked, his granddad was a quiet man. A little distant. Dick didn't mind that he was quiet. He didn't even mind that sometimes he had to ask him the same question several times before getting an answer; his grandma would have to remind him to speak up. Dick didn't mind because when his granddad did speak, people seemed to listen.

His granddad also spoke differently than other men. Though he worked with a team of ruffians, as his grandma called them, his granddad didn't speak rough at all. His father told him that granddad was a product of another time when people believed that if you didn't have something good to say about someone, you said nothing at all. His granddad lived by that rule. Dick had never heard him speak evil of another. Never uttered a curse word in the presence of a lady or a child. Heck, his granddad had probably never even sworn in front of another man.

Dick loved the auction. He loved everything about it. But he especially admired the auctioneers, and at this particular auction was his favorite of all times—Howard Mayfield.

"And a fine little mare she is. Who will give me to start her out? Five-dollar bid, will you say five, five, five?"

Mayfield's chant was smooth and rhythmic, like music. It echoed through the sound system, enchanting both the bidders and the onlookers. Every time a bid was made he'd point at the person who made it, then turn to the crowd, encouraging someone else to bid higher.

"Well, give me two and a half. Now everybody wants in. Make it three, now a half, three and a half, now four, now a half, I'm at four and a half, you're out, sir, bids over here, make it five, five, five, thank you sir, now a half..."

If a bidding war erupted, Mayfield would encourage the two remaining bidders, making them feel as if their very lives depended on winning that bid. He'd first focus all his attention on the low bidder until that bidder caved and offered the desired amount. Then he'd switch to the bidder's opponent, slowly raising the amount as he went, until the final bid was reached. Dick would rather have listened to Howard Mayfield sell livestock than to any rock-and-roll hit ever recorded.

After they watched the auction for a time, the pair made their way through the crowd to the livestock holding area behind the sales barn that held the horses waiting to enter the sales

ring. His granddad took hold of the top rail and placed one foot on the bottom rail. Dick did the same, only he couldn't reach the top rail, so he settled for one a bit closer to the ground.

“See them horses?” his granddad said. “Those are wild horses caught in the Red Desert just outside Rawlins. They've never been ridden.”

Dick was fascinated. He stared at the horses with a smile so broad it could have covered the entire state. They were marvelously proud animals, these mustangs. They were jumping and crow hopping and kicking up dust. Proving their bravado with fire in their eyes. Full of the spirit born from the wild.

In the midst of the herd came a tall, lean, and weathered man who immediately captured Dick's attention. He moved purposely through the animals, a slight bow in his legs, and took on the appearance of a real cowboy from his sweat-stained hat down to his trail-worn bronc stomper boots. While the entire herd of mustangs jumped and kicked all around him, the man didn't seem to notice, or care. The horses gave him a wide berth, keeping watchful eyes. They knew this man and it was obvious, even to a six-year-old boy, that the man knew horses.

Dick was so focused upon the man that he didn't feel the pat on his shoulder. But when the pat turned to a squeeze, Dick looked up at his granddad. He was met with a face hardened. His granddad's mouth moved into a frown and his eyes seemed to narrow.

“That guy you're watchin' over there with those wild horses,” his granddad said. “That's Frank Robbins. He's the son-of-a-bitch that caught Desert Dust and he had to use an airplane to do it.”