

Chapter 1

FIREWORKS

The warming earth, the flower-scented air, leafy trees rich with young fruit, all brought the promise of summer to Hood River Valley.

Old, woolly white Mount Hood stood guard over sloping fields and orchards that lay like a checkerboard of greens below brightening highlands.

On one of those fields played Hazel Weston and her four-year-old brother, Kelly. Actually, Hazel was watching the boy for her busy mother. This was washday, and she preferred wildflowers and sunshine to tub and washboard, as any girl would.

Hazel's world looked ablaze with the color of poppies as she sprawled lazily on the ground, letting her chestnut locks mingle with the tall grass. The girl drew morning air deep into her lungs while she eavesdropped on some neighboring sparrows. Her only concern was whether she could shed her coat. After all, Kelly had left his jacket indoors.

Hazel smiled over at her brother, who had straight, brown hair and the mischievous, blue eyes of their father. Her mind seemed to drift with the gauzy clouds overhead. The year of 1926 had been good to her thus far. She was recalling her eighth-grade graduation, the thundering applause ...

"I'll get you!" shouted Kelly in a manly voice.

Hazel chuckled, thinking her brother must be absorbed in a game of soldier. She slowly focused on the small trooper bobbing up and down with great vigor.

He shouted again, this time more boldly, "I'll get all you bees!"

Bees? Hazel suddenly sprang to life, her eyes riveting on the boy. There marched her brother - atop a nest of yellow jackets!

"Kelly!" the girl shrieked as she flung off her coat.

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The boy, lost in his pretend world of mighty warriors, seemed oblivious to the knots of angry hornets clinging to his shirt and blue jeans.

Whack! went Hazel's coat as she tried to dust the creatures off her brother.

Kelly wailed, "Stop that!"

"Get home fast!" Hazel ordered as she swatted at him again.

His short legs flying, Kelly cried all the way to the back porch. "Stop hitting meeee!"

The girl pushed him through the doorway and into the screened room where their mother leaned over a tub of sudsy wash water.

"What's all the commotion about?" Mrs. Weston asked, drying her hands.

"Yellow jackets, Mom!" Hazel panted. "Kelly was covered with them."

Quickly, Mother pulled off her son's shirt. "Not a mark anywhere! Your sister did a good job."

Kelly pouted, "I could have killed them all if she hadn't stopped -"

"Ow!" Hazel interrupted his boast. One grumpy hornet had gotten revenge, making a red welt on the girl's arm.

"That's not fair!" Hazel protested. "I'm not the one who disturbed the nest - he is!" She pointed to her smug-faced brother.

Mrs. Weston headed for the medicine cabinet. "Life is hardly ever fair, Hazel. A grown girl like you should know that."

Hazel clenched her teeth while her mother spread a poultice on the wound. At once the pasty mixture began to draw out the sting. Hazel wished the medicine could also draw out the fiery feelings she had for her unsympathetic brother in that moment.

"I'm quite proud of your quick thinking, Hazel," Mother said. "If those yellow jackets had connected with Kelly's hide,

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he would have swelled into one boy-sized welt. I've heard that some children have even died -"

"Well, I could have killed every one of 'em," Kelly repeated, muttering to himself.

Mrs. Weston's black eyes flashed. "Young man, you stay away from that nest!"

The disgruntled boy shuffled past Hazel and into his room to sulk.

With Kelly out of mischief - at least temporarily - the girl helped her mother haul a basketful of laundry to the clothesline.

Hazel huffed like a steam engine while Mother carried her share of the weight easily. The girl often wondered how so much strength could be packed into one slight woman.

Hazel knew that her mother's past, a story of survival in the stern lands of eastern Oregon, had fashioned her into the capable woman she was.

"But Mom's so beautiful!" the girl mused, studying features that seemed to contradict all the years of toil under a hot canyon sun: petal-smooth skin, and silky hair, the color of chocolate, swept high into a pompadour. Except for a few stray wisps that fluttered about her face, Mrs. Weston hardly looked the part of a washerwoman.

Mother's voice cut into her thoughts. "Thompsons said they'll be needing strawberry pickers soon."

Hazel glanced over at the long rows of plants that covered the acreage behind Mr. and Mrs. Thompson's house to the east.

While Mother stretched to pin another garment on the line, she asked, "How about it, Hazel? Think you could handle such backbreaking work?"

Her daughter grinned. "I've driven derrick before!"

"Just barely!" Mother teased. "But this job will be a little different. This job pays - ten cents a carrier!"

The girl's mind churned with figures, "Six hallocks to a carrier ... ten cents a carrier ..."

Mother laughed. "I think I detect dollar signs in your big eyes!"

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Hazel colored slightly as an eager-little-girl feeling bubbled inside her. She was already spending her wages for shoes - fancy shoes for high school programs. And maybe she could buy a matching pair for her mother. How generous she felt!

Her daydreams tumbled back to earth when she heard Mother say, "Of course, I'll pick with you. No respectable young lady picks alone. It just isn't proper."

A few days later, Hazel donned her khaki coveralls and tied back her hair into what Kelly called a "shaving brush." The dew had dried, the berries were ripe, and the girl felt as frisky as a colt on a summer morning.

She and Mother started work at the top of two separate rows.

Hazel quickly learned to scoot on her knees along the spongy ground. But the strawberries thunked into her pail every-so-slowly compared to those of her mother. In fact, when Mrs. Weston finished her first row, Hazel lagged far behind, plodding along on all fours like a khaki-colored tortoise.

Five red heaps in her carrier meant only one hallock to go for her first ten cents.

"Whew!" Hazel sighed, wiping strawberry-stained fingers across her brow.

Mother was passing her again. "Don't look so discouraged, Dear! I've had lots of practice. You'll get better with time."

A polite, half-smile flickered across the girl's face. She was picking thimblefuls compared to the carriers Mother had already filled.

Still, the hope of those stylish shoes spurred Hazel on. And by quitting time she had filled twenty carriers, earning two dollars.

"That's good for your first day!" Mother complimented her.

A few minutes later, when Hazel peered at her reflection in the mirror, she burst into laughter. Her face, streaked with dirt and berry juice, could have easily passed for that of a rodeo clown.

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As strawberry days continued, other pickers filtered into the field. Some were migrants from the orange groves of California. They claimed to be “passing time” until cherries ripened.

Hazel liked listening to their yarns, although their tales could never outdo her Grandma Smith’s snake-and-Indian stories.

The girl smiled at the thought of her grandmother, a doctor of sorts in the Imnaha Canyon. She wondered when the elderly woman would visit Hood River Valley again.

Often in the mornings, Hazel caught a glimpse of her neighbors, the Hodson children, piling into a truck. They were headed for Parkdale and their uncle’s ranch where they, too, would pick strawberries. The Hodsons resembled stairs. There was Edith, the eldest, followed by her brothers, Harv, Lenny, and Eugene.

Edith had recently graduated from high school and hoped to enter nurse’s training in the fall.

“Nurse’s training!” Hazel breathed the words like a prayer. She also longed for such a career, but it seemed a lifetime away.

“I still have four years of high school to complete,” she lamented to herself.

One day while Hazel ate lunch under a shade tree, Edith Hodson appeared.

“Hello!” The older girl beamed. “I’ve been helping Mother make jam this morning.” Her turned-up nose added daintiness to Edith’s every expression.

Hazel invited her friend to sit beside her, then asked, “What’s the news about nurse’s training?”

Edith grinned. “I’m still going in September - to the Adventist hospital in Portland.”

“That’s good!” Hazel replied wistfully. She knew that the Hodsons were Seventh-day Adventists like her own Uncle Joe.

A steady breeze stirred the tree over them as the girls chatted on.

“After all this work, it’ll be nice to have a holiday for a change,” Edith said.

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Hazel jumped up. She had forgotten all about the Fourth of July. She wondered if Father planned anything special, then decided that any day without strawberry picking would be special.

On the Fourth of July an orange sun crept over the mountain, promising a clear day.

Hazel helped her mother prepare and pack a large lunch for the community festivities at Parkdale.

The relay races and horseshoe tournaments reminded the girl of Independence Day celebrations along the Imnaha River when she was young.

At the picnic Hazel enjoyed mingling with school friends from Barrett.

“Are you staying for the fireworks?” Lucy Trent asked.

“I don’t think so,” Hazel replied. “Mom says Kelly needs to get home by bedtime.”

Mr. Weston had been eavesdropping. “Oh, you’ll see fireworks all right!” Father chuckled. “More fireworks than you can imagine!”

When Hazel searched his face for some clue, Mr. Weston only shrugged. “It’s a surprise,” he said.

The girl could hardly wait to reach their house on Belmont Drive.

“Follow me!” Father ordered as he led the girl to the barn behind the house.

There he climbed a gate to the roof of the adjoining woodshed, then helped Hazel up, up until they were both perched atop the barn.

Daylight faded fast, leaving Mount Hood and Mount Adams a pale crimson against the darkening skies. Only a chorus of crickets penetrated the still air.

Suddenly, the sky above White Salmon to the north burst into color. Sprays of lighted confetti rained down.

Just as a popping sound reached Hazel’s ears, she turned and spotted more fireworks flickering over Parkdale, then Oak Grove. She cheered boisterously from her splendid arena seat.

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Each time Hazel turned, she enjoyed another explosion of brilliant lights. Now she understood why her father had said there would be more fireworks than she could imagine.

She glanced over at him. His face, barely visible under his ten-gallon hat, glowed like a little boy's. He seemed to be enjoying the spectacle as much as Hazel.

The girl smiled, realizing how rare this moment was for her father, whose life had consisted of hard labor, first as a cowboy, then as a ranch owner, then as a storekeeper, and now as a carpenter.

When the last flickers waned around them, Mr. Weston said, "It's time to go in."

"Thanks, Dad!" Hazel exclaimed. "This has been a wonderful Fourth!"

Her father didn't answer. He simply helped her down from the roof. Hazel then skipped happily into the house.

The next morning, the girl still reveled in memories of the night before. She also thought about the shoes she would soon buy with her earnings.

But Hazel was jolted abruptly out of her dreamy mood when someone outside shouted, "Fire! Fire! Hodsons' house is on fire!"