

**Excerpt:**

***Stardusted***  
**Chapter One**

Copyright © 2019 by Deborah J. McCaskey  
[www.debmccaskey.com](http://www.debmccaskey.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Scanning, uploading, and electronic distribution of this book, or the facilitation of such without the permission of the publisher, is prohibited. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This is a work of fiction. Frankie Franklin and her friends, family, studio, colleagues, movie and song titles and content, are all products of the author's imagination. The roles played by historical or celebrated persons are entirely fictional, although these imagined versions of them do agree with the generally known facts of their lives.

ISBN: 978-1-7332589-0-6 (e-book)  
ISBN: 978-1-7332589-1-3 (paperback)

# Chapter One

**The first thing** you should know is: I did it.

I was up to my neck in bubbles at the time, just a cowgirl relaxing at the end of a long, dusty, and profitable cattle drive, soaking my cares away in a zinc bathtub set in the middle of my hotel room, and enthusiastically singing “Sweet Betsy from Pike.”

But my idyll would be short. As I got to the part where the dog wagged its tail and looked wondrously sad, there was the ominous clump of heavy boots in the hallway outside my room, and a sharp knock on the door.

As it happened, I already knew danger was coming, and when I looked up, my face showed no fear. I was ready.

So when the two men—I had known there would be two—kicked my door open and burst into the room, guns drawn, they found that I had my own six-shooter in hand, and them in my sights. I squeezed the trigger.

There was a deafening *crack!*

And the wrong man fell down.

Irritated at first, I swore. But then shock, even horror, took over as I realized what had really happened and I leaped out of the tub, and ran for the fallen man. The gun, forgotten for the moment, splashed into the water and made a dull clank on the bottom of the tub.

“Cut! Cut, for Chrissakes!”

Director Arthur Janeway had exploded from his chair like a pheasant flushed from cover. I ignored him as I hotfooted it across the hotel room set on Fortune Motion Pictures’ Soundstage Three.

There were maybe forty or so other people not far away, now making noise and stirring in confusion, but most were back in the deep shadows on the other side of the bright lights and the cameras, and I wasn’t thinking of them, anyway.

All I knew then was that a promising young actor named Sam Harvey was sprawled on the floor, gasping and holding his side as a dark, wet stain bloomed under his hand, soaking his shirtfront—because someone had put a real bullet in my Colt, where there should have only been blanks. Someone either evil or careless, who was not me.

As I knelt beside Sam, he reached his hand out and grabbed mine, squeezing it hard. A quick glance at me, and then he shut his eyes tight, his breathing coming quick and ragged. Pain contorted his long, sensitive face.

As I crouched there in my flesh-colored bathing suit, Sam’s bloody hand in mine, the horror remained, now joined by surprisingly fierce anger. Dammit, this was just a picture, with costumes and made-up things to say. With blood that was just glycerin and chocolate syrup. No one was supposed to really be shot. No one was supposed to be bleeding real blood. I felt ill. I wanted Sam to be unshot. And I wanted to strangle whoever was responsible.

My dresser, Alice, had thrown a robe over me, and now I bunched up a corner of it and pressed it against Sam’s side where I thought the wound was. No one had come forward from the crowd to shove me aside and show off their first-aid skills; this gave me the impression that no one else knew anything better to do.

Sam opened his eyes again and fixed his gaze on me like I was his lifeline.

“Miss Franklin ... I’m ... so sorry!” he rasped. He was worried he’d spoiled the shot, and it made me want to cry. His chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. “It’s ... hot. Hurts.”

He closed his eyes again, and I saw him concentrating on breathing. In and out, in and out. Painfully. God, where was the nurse?

“Help’s coming, Sam,” I said, hoping that was true. It had to be. Everyone has a job on a movie set. It must have been somebody’s to call, or run, for help.

“No, I’m sorry, Sam. I’m sorry,” I said. “Just hang on. You’ll be all right.”

He squeezed my hand again. The blood was getting sticky and smelled metallic. I fought down nausea, and more anger. What diabolical or monumentally thoughtless person could have made me shoot Sam, a good kid who had just gotten his first chance in the pictures?

About a hundred years later the studio nurse appeared and replaced me at Sam’s side. She got to work, tearing his shirt open, inspecting the wound, pulling gauze and real bandages out of her bag. Her moves were practiced, professional, and comforting.

I backed away from Sam and let Arthur put an arm around me, which he did gingerly, because of the blood on me and my robe, and also because I probably had steam coming out of my ears. I was still worried for Sam, but now that the nurse was here, I could turn my attentions to the property department, which had given me a gun that had live rounds in it. I was angry and knew I looked it.

An ambulance showed up outside the big soundstage door and the attendants put Sam on a stretcher and carried him out as the crew watched, silent and shocked. Sam lifted a hand to wave weakly at them. He was a trouper.

Around us, crew members were busy turning off the huge lights, and moving them and the cameras, microphones and booms, the miles of snaking cables, the spindly tripods and stands, the wooden boxes, a giant fan, and all the other stuff needed to shoot a picture, having urgent-looking discussions as they tried to salvage the shooting schedule for Fortune’s production of *Prairie Princess*, starring Frankie Franklin.

That would be the same Frankie Franklin, right there in her bloodstained robe, whom they were now looking at out of the sides of their eyes. I guess they were wondering whether I was victim or villain. I was looking, too. I was looking for someone to punch.

John, the assistant director, hovered nearby, not wanting to interrupt Arthur while he was busy comforting me or keeping me from committing mayhem on the first prop man I saw; he probably couldn’t tell which. Everyone who ever has worked with me knows that I don’t show anger by screaming and waving my arms—unless it’s called for in the script. Instead, I get deadly silent. Sometimes that scares people.

“I’m okay,” I said to Arthur, grimly. “Talk to John.”

I didn’t need comforting, I told myself. I only needed to know Sam was going to be all right, and then I needed to know whose head would roll.

Looking about and frustrated at finding no one to berate, I finally remembered that there had been another actor in the scene, my costar, who must be at least as upset as I was, and that I should see how he was doing.

I found him near where the camera had been, sitting in a folding canvas chair with his name on the back, pensively holding a cigarette, a tendril of gray-white smoke curling up in front of his world-famous profile. It was a great image. He looked like he was posing even when he wasn’t posing.

Raymond Sinclair was a former Broadway star, former matinee idol, and—until I had the good sense to divorce him two years ago—my former drunken, adulterous husband. Drink had just about ruined his career when I persuaded the studio to give him another chance in this picture; don't ask me why. On second thought, do ask me. The answer is that, when he was sober, he was a great actor. And maybe I felt sorry for him a little.

Raymond looked up as I approached, barefoot, in my bloody robe.

"Good God," he murmured faintly. "You look like Lady Macbeth."

"That isn't funny," I said. "How are you doing?"

"I need a drink," he said to the floor in front of him, then glanced up and added, "But don't worry, it'll just be orange juice."

"Come by, we can talk later," I said. "I'm not sure what's supposed to happen now."

"There are police here," he said. "Do you think they'll arrest you?"

"Don't be silly," I said. "Fixx is on the job."

I had seen the head of our studio's publicity department stride onto the set and head for the uniformed officers who had shown up. He was a square-shouldered, bull-necked figure with an imposing presence, and went in for understated and very expensive suits; today's was charcoal gray. In his breast pocket was a fancy silk handkerchief, and, in his other pockets, most of the local constabulary. If he had had more notice, there would not be police here at all. Fortune Pictures didn't have its own police force; we weren't MGM. But we did have Leonard Fixx.

He was well named, Mr. Fixx. We would have probably called him that behind his back if it hadn't been his real name, because that's what he did for the studio. He fixed things. He could be jocular or serious as needed, and right now he was expertly blending the two, his whole manner signaling that he was here to take care of problems.

Fixx was talking to some Culver City cops not far from Ray and me while the set dressers rolled up the bloodstained carpet and Louie from props fished the Colt out of the bathtub. That reminded me that I had dropped the gun on my way out of the tub. I remembered the tiny hiss as the hot barrel hit the water.

I started off in Louie's direction and saw Fixx glance over at me, a quick flicker around the eyes showing his surprise. I guess he thought I would have been spirited away by now. And sure enough, here came John, the first assistant director, having finished talking to Arthur and ready to do the spiriting. A tall, skinny, anxious young guy, he was still holding his megaphone as though it was another part of him.

"John, what the hell—" I said as he took my arm and turned me away from the cops and Fixx. I looked over my shoulder to see Fixx subside and go back to entertaining the police as John hustled me out of the way.

Alice scampered over with my fur-trimmed slippers and John waited while I shuffled into them. Then he said, gently, "Let's get you to your dressing room. The limo's waiting."

"Yeah, but—"

He kept me walking. "Mr. Fixx's orders, Frankie," he said. "C'mon, you know how it goes. Let him do his job."

"But who did this, John?" I asked as he escorted me out into the late winter sunshine and bundled me into the studio limo, a boxy black Cadillac.

"Who did it?" he repeated as he got into the back seat of the big car with me. "Well, you."

I looked daggers at him. “You’re not any funnier than Raymond,” I said.

He darted a glance at me. The bloodstains on my robe looked like flowers, horrific flowers, and I could tell that the sight of me was getting to him. But it was his job at the moment to whisk me out of the way, and he was determined to get that done.

“Look, sorry, Frankie,” he said. “I don’t know any more than you do who loaded that gun with live ammo. Except it had to be someone in props.”

We were quiet for the minute or so it took to get to my private dressing room, which was a neat, small cottage on the Fortune Motion Pictures lot. Whoever’s star was on the rise at the time got to use it, and it had been decorated to suit my taste for a year now. It was close enough to walk from the soundstage, but this obviously wasn’t the best time for me to take a stroll around the place.

I didn’t respond to John’s statement of the obvious. Of course it was the property department. They were in charge of every item that performers handled in a scene. But who in props? When I first saw the Colt today, it had been hanging on the chair next to the bathtub, in the holster of my character’s gun belt. The last person to have touched it before me would have been—should have been—the prop master, Vernon Stone.

Yesterday, he and I had gone over how I would use it in the scene, and it hadn’t been loaded then. I knew because I checked. I felt a wave of guilt now, as I realized I should have checked it again today. No one else would see it that way, but I did. The weight of this settled on me, and it would be a long time before it went away.

Vernon was a wiry, energetic guy who seemed to take his work seriously, but other than that I couldn’t say I knew him well. I had talked to him mostly about props. And sometimes jigsaw puzzles. He liked puzzles. He bought the latest ones the moment they came out.

“So it must have been Vernon,” I said aloud as we pulled up in front of the cottage. John nodded. I wanted it to be mostly Vernon’s fault. Not honorable of me, but there you go. It would be simpler that way. I could demand that he be fired, maybe. But I knew it wouldn’t help that much. It wouldn’t unshoot Sam.

A bold-lettered sign on the door of my dressing room read FRANKIE FRANKLIN. You would have seen me posing right there in the current issue of *Photoplay*, next to a story headlined, “America’s Kid Sister Grows Up.”

That was me: America’s Kid Sister. I had not exactly been a child star—I was twenty and married when I played a teenager in my first major role—but the studio had promoted me as a spirited youngster anyway. And the people who wrote the stories liked me, so far. One had even declared that, “Frankie has earned her place in the pantheon of pert and personable blondes” like Harlow, Lombard and Davies.

So far, Mr. Fixx had managed to keep them from writing about my brief marriage to Raymond. But the fact that it might have been him that I shot today was going to be hard for them to ignore.

“I want to talk to Vernon,” I said as he walked me to the door.

“I’ll bring him,” John said. “And thanks, Frankie.”

“For what?”

“For not being an emotional dame.”

“Don’t worry—in here, I’m hysterical,” I said, placing a hand over my heart and giving him my most winning smile.

He looked grateful as he left me. When you get to be a big deal in the movies, people think someone should always be with you. But I didn't want anyone with me right now. I wanted to get cleaned up. And then talk to Vernon. John had said he would find him and bring him to me.

Once inside my all-white dressing room, I considered my options. Undoubtedly the police would be questioning Vernon right now, and I pictured him answering in his precise, almost fussy manner. And then he would be told Miss Franklin wanted to see him. My initial fury had calmed just a bit so that I didn't think I would actually punch him. But what would I say? How would I play it? What did I want to have him tell me, or me to tell him?

Should I be imperious? "How dare you endanger my picture?" Sympathetic? "Oh, Vernon, you must be feeling terrible right now." No, I'd probably just let him have it with a direct, "How could you be so stupid? What the hell happened?" and demand to know why he thought he shouldn't be fired on the spot.

But first I needed a shower. A modern shower, no bathtub, had been one of my first requests when the dressing room was decorated for me. When I was working, I didn't want to lounge in a bath—not off-camera, anyway. I wanted to get on with the work and get home as soon as possible. I headed across the all-white carpet, and went into the all-white bathroom.

I dropped the ruined robe on the sparkling clean tile floor—I felt bad leaving it for the maid but had no idea what else to do with it—and turned on the shower.

Picking up the fresh bar of Lux soap, I stepped into the shower, glad to let the hot water and soap sluice away the blood that was on my hands and forearms, and even on my calf, and send it down the drain, I only wished I could also steam away the vision of Sam's ashen face, and the feel of his bloody hand in mine as we waited for help to arrive.

Eventually I decided I couldn't stay in the shower forever, as comforting as it was. I got out and dried off vigorously with one of the fluffy white towels from the stack that appeared daily, as if by magic, in my dressing room, no matter how many I used.

I dressed quickly in a white skirt and blue, short-sleeved cashmere sweater, a sporty ensemble that suited southern California's early March weather. Many places in the country might still be under snow, but here we shivered and complained of the cold whenever nighttime temperatures dropped below 60 degrees. With nearly three hundred days of sunshine a year, the climate was perfect for shooting pictures outdoors, and was one reason the business had planted itself here among the orange groves.

A look in the mirror reminded me that my hair was still swept up in its 19<sup>th</sup>-century hairdo, with a pouf of curls for bangs, extra hair, and about a million hairpins. It contrasted bizarrely with my modern clothes, and I felt that I couldn't give Vernon a proper talking-to looking like this. I picked up my white telephone and called hairdressing to come and fix it, and hoped they could get to me before John brought the prop master here. I hadn't done such a great job removing the on-camera makeup either, but I'd go after what remained of it with the cold cream later.

Then I reverted to the nervous habit I had of checking my handbag several times a day, just to make sure everything was still in it: paper money in the billfold, change in the change purse, driving license, a clean hankie, lipstick, and the penknife my father had given me on my fourteenth birthday.

This small artifact, from a simpler time in my life, was always with me. It had an antler handle and a blade that was good for cutting fruit, sharpening pencils, opening envelopes: all kinds of things. It was usually in my handbag or a pocket, or even in my bra, often along with my lipstick, if my outfit didn't have pockets. A couple of my custom-made brassieres even had a little pocket sewn into them. With just these two items on me, I felt like I was ready for anything.

But making sure nothing had escaped my bag when I wasn't looking only killed a couple of minutes. Seeking distraction, I found the book I had been reading during the interminable periods of inactivity on the set: Agatha Christie's novel from last year, *Murder in the Calais Coach*. I hadn't put a bookmark in where I'd left off, and I thumbed through the first few chapters absently, until Teddy from hairdressing showed up. He relieved me of the pins and the curly hairpiece, then fluffed my own short, wavy bob back into place.

"All done," he said, giving my hair one last pat. "You look ready to slay 'em. Oh—I mean—"

"It's OK, Teddy," I said. "Let's hope I didn't."

Teddy left and I went to an armchair and sat with my book for a few more minutes, still not able to concentrate on the doings of a bunch of passengers stuck on a train in the mountains of Yugoslavia, or on the detective's methodical search for who killed the obnoxious Ratchett. I had questions of my own to ask our property master, and patience is not my strong suit.

Maybe John had gotten interrupted while looking for Vernon. Maybe he had forgotten he'd promised to bring Vernon to me.

"Maybe a lot of things," I muttered under my breath, and left the dressing room.