

# Chapter One

May 1876

Jess Williams wasn't unlike most young men growing up in Kansas in the late 1800's. He worked on the family farm and did odd jobs in town for extra money. He never had much time for play. He just turned fourteen a few months ago. He was a slender kid, standing five foot eight inches high.

His father, John, had built their ranch from the ground up. He started with only a half-dozen or so cattle and his herd now had grown to over one hundred head. He had crops planted on about ten acres of fertile rich land. John hadn't always been a farmer and rancher. He had worked cattle drives when he was younger and he worked as a sheriff in a few small towns in Texas where he had grown up. Not tough towns though. His duties mostly consisted of breaking up bar fights and locking up the drunks who couldn't let go of the bar without falling on their asses.

After his last job as sheriff in a little town in Texas called Sparta, he decided to pack up and just roam around until he found somewhere he could call home. After almost a year of wandering around, he found some land just five miles outside of a small town called Black Creek, in the state of Kansas. Good fertile land and Black Creek

ran right through the middle of it. He spent some time in the small town. He rode around the area visiting some of the other ranches and farms. Everyone he talked to seemed downright friendly. He decided that he was going to spend the rest of his life there. He was sure of it. He spent some nights camped out on the land he planned to settle on. One night, just before dusk, when he was getting a campfire started to cook him some beans and bacon, he actually picked out the site for the family cemetery. There was a giant oak tree about five hundred feet from where he decided he would build the house. The oak tree would provide some shade for the future gravesides. John was a planner in life for sure.

John first met Jess's mom, Becky, in town and he thought she was just the prettiest woman he had ever seen. He decided right then and there that he was going to marry her. John was that way. He decided quickly what he wanted to do and then he would set out to do it. He still had some of the money he saved from his work as a sheriff, but it wasn't enough to build the house. He worked several odd jobs around town and for some of the surrounding ranches to earn enough money to buy the lumber and materials he needed to build the house. Of course, he preferred working in town since that gave him more of a chance to see Becky.

Becky was a seamstress and a darn good one. She had a little shop behind Smythes general store where the townspeople could drop off their clothes for repair or to be fitted for new ones. Mr. Smythe didn't charge her any rent. Instead, he took a cut of what money she made and of course, he had all his clothes tailored for free. Becky first saw John when he had come into the general store for supplies. She knew right off that he was different. She was interested, but certainly had no idea that he had already fallen in love with her.

Jess's sister, Samantha, was seven and full of hellfire. Always in trouble and getting away with everything. Although she helped Jess with chores, she usually caused him more work. Mostly, she would tag along with him and bug him until he just wanted to thump her on the back of her head. The only thing that stopped him from doing so was the knowledge that he would get a switch taken to his backside. It was around noon and it was a typical day around the ranch. Becky was in the house making some lunch for Jess to take out to his pa. Jess had finished throwing some hay in the stables and was walking up to the house to see if his mom had the food ready when Samantha came out of the stables with her hands full of hay. She was jumping up and down, each time letting a little hay drop here and there. Jess knew she was just egging him on.

"One of these days I'm going to thump you good, Samantha."

"I don't think so, 'cause you know daddy will switch you but good." Jess gave her the evil eye for a moment and turned around and headed for the house. Just as he walked in his mother was wrapping John's lunch in a cloth.

"I'll bet your pa is mighty hungry by now Jess," said Becky. "You get this out to him right away, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'll get it straight out to him, I promise."

"Make sure you do."

"Can I ride The Paint today?"

"Did your father tell you that you couldn't?"

"No, I was just asking."

"Then I'm sure that it's okay."

Jess took the lunch from his ma and headed for the stables to saddle up The Paint and walked past the mess that Samantha had made with the hay. *One of these days*, Jess thought to himself, *one of these days*.

Jess had The Paint saddled up and out of the stable in less than five minutes. Out of the six horses they owned, Jess had always liked The Paint the best. He was a gentle horse and Jess always gave him a few apples or carrots each day. Jess always loved riding out on the ranch. Sometimes he would imagine that he was on his own and roaming around the country going from one town to another. He was always wondering about what he would do when he grew up. Whether or not he would stay and work the ranch or go off and do something different. Maybe he'd be a sheriff like his pa was, or maybe he'd own his own business in town. Of course, like most young boys in the West, Jess would imagine that he was a gunfighter, and, of course, the *fastest* gunfighter in the entire West. Whenever Jess got some free time from his chores, you could find him down by the creek at the ranch drawing his hand-carved wooden pistol that his pa had made for him. He had asked his pa awhile back to teach him to pistol shoot but John said he was too young for that yet. Instead, John carved the wooden pistol and told him to practice with that for now. It only took fifteen minutes before Jess found his pa. He was looking over a new calf that seemed to be lost and not doing very well.

“‘Bout time you got here boy. My stomach’s been growling like a bear.”

“Sorry, Pa,” replied Jess nervously. “I got here as soon as I could...honest. I never stopped or anything, I rode straight out here. The biscuits Ma made you are still warm and she put some honey in a jar to go with them.”

John looked at the boy and gave him a big smile.

“Don’t get you’re britches all up in a bunch, get down off that horse and let’s have a biscuit or two.”

Jess always liked it when his pa let him have lunch with him out on the range. It made him feel more like a man and Jess always figured it was never too early to become a man.

“Jess, don’t forget to stack up some more hay in the barn and stable tonight before supper.”

“Okay, Pa. If I get done early enough, can I go down to the creek and mess around a bit?”

John knew exactly what that meant. “I guess so. As long as you get your chores finished.”

“Will you come down to the creek and help me practice a little?”

“Maybe after dinner. We’ll see what kind of mood your ma is in. She’s still mad about me carving you that wooden pistol.”

“How come she’s so dead set against it, Pa?”

“Well, let’s just say she has her reasons, for sure. Well, I got to get back to work son. You get back there and throw that hay and tell your ma thanks for the meal. I’ll see ya in a couple hours.”

Jess got back to the ranch as quick as he could so he could finish his chores and get down to the creek to practice his draw with his wooden pistol. On the way back he imagined himself a sheriff tracking down a bad guy who had robbed the bank of some town. He imagined he was tracking the robber by following his own tracks back to the ranch. He had quite an imagination. When Jess arrived back at the ranch, he brushed down The Paint and put him in his stall. The horse kept looking at him and stomping his right hoof. Jess pulled an apple out of his left pocket and gave it to The Paint. Then he finished the chores that his pa had told him to do.

Jess went over to the stables and got out his homemade wooden pistol and holster. He had made the holster himself out of some scrap leather his pa had given him. He fashioned the holster a little different from most holsters. He attached it to the belt at an angle so that the barrel of the pistol pointed slightly forward. He fashioned the belt so that the gun rode lower on the hip and he tied it down to his thigh with a leather tie. Jess ran down to the creek and began to practice. This time he imagined that he was a sheriff in a small town and he had been called out on the street by a gunslinger wanted by the law. Of course, he out-drew the gunslinger. He was there about a half-hour when he heard his ma call him to supper. As he walked up towards the stable to put his rig away, he wondered if his pa would come back down to the creek after supper so Jess could show him how good he was doing on his own.

Dinner consisted of stew and bread. His ma was a pretty good cook. For dessert, they had apple pie. Samantha kept kicking Jess under the table. Jess kept giving her the evil eye whenever his ma and pa weren’t looking. He knew that if he got in a fight with her that he would get sent to bed early, with no chance of going back down to the creek. Samantha knew that too, which was why she kept it up. Jess ate a good helping of stew and then a big slice of pie. John finished his pie, washing it down with another cup of hot coffee, and pushed himself away from the table.

“Mighty good meal, woman. I don’t know anyone who can make apple pie quite like you,” John said with a look of pride on his face.

Becky blushed a little. She was very modest. “You’re quite a charmer, Mr. Williams,” she replied. “Quite a charmer indeed.”

Since they both seemed to be in a good mood, Jess thought this was as good a time as any to ask.

“Pa, you think you could go down to the creek with me a little,” he asked nervously. His ma gave him that look she always gave him when he mentioned about going down by the creek. She knew what that meant and it wasn’t fishing. Jess kept looking at his pa figuring if he looked at his ma it would just get her started.

“You know I don’t like you fooling around with that gun, Jess,” Becky snorted. Jess kept looking at his pa, waiting for a sign.

“Sweetheart,” John said, as he got up from the dinner table, “you are about the best cook around these here parts. I don’t know anyone who can bake a pie like you can. Course, women are good at certain things, and men are good at other things. Women have to be good cooks else they won’t ever get a man. On the other hand, men who don’t know how to shoot a gun may never live to get married to a wonderful woman like you in the first place. Matter-of-fact, if I’d never learned to shoot a pistol, I wouldn’t be here today,

and you know that to be a fact.” As he finished his last word he had walked slowly around to Becky at the other end of the table and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“Well, I still don’t like it and you know it.”

“He’s going to learn anyway, so he might as well learn it right.”

Jess had already got up and was out the door heading for the stable to get his rig. He was excited that his pa was finally going to show him how to handle a gun, even if it *was* only a wooden one. John stopped by Samantha’s seat and gave her a kiss on top of her head and just as he reached the door, and without looking back he said, “by the way, you ought not to be kicking your brother under the table like that at supper.”

It was Samantha’s turn to blush now. She dropped her head a little and replied sheepishly. “Yes, Pa.”

Just as John walked out the door he heard Becky quietly say, “quite the charmer indeed, Mr. Williams...indeed.”

John met Jess between the house and the stable and they both headed down to the creek. The creek wasn’t very big. It was only about six to ten feet across and very shallow except for a few deep pools here and there.

“Pa, when you gonna let me shoot a real pistol?”

“When I think you’re ready, Jess...not before.”

“But I been practicing with this here wooden pistol for months now,” Jess said with a pleading look in his eyes.

“I know,” replied John patiently. “But you have to understand, you just turned fourteen a few months back and I’m still your pa and I’ll decide when you’re ready, understand?”

“Yes sir...I understand,” Jess replied, his eyes glancing down at the ground.

“Okay. Now, let’s see you draw a few times.”

Jess got himself ready. He made sure the holster was tight and in just the right place. He drew the wooden pistol several times and each time he re-holstered the gun as quickly as he drew it. The first time he drew, John was actually quite surprised with his hand speed, though he shouldn’t have been. While Jess was going through his exercise he imagined that he was a gunfighter and was out in the street of some unknown town ready to shoot it out with some bad guy.

“How am I doing, Pa?”

“Not bad. Not bad at all, but speed isn’t the only important thing.”

“Well, Pa, if I was in a gunfight, I’d want to be faster than the other guy so I wouldn’t get shot!”

“Yeah, but if you were one-half of a second faster than the other guy, and you missed with your first shot, who would be laying in the street, gut shot, and looking up at the sky wondering what the heck happened?”

Jess thought about that for a moment. “I see what you mean, Pa.”

“Okay Jess, here is your first and most important lesson. Listen very carefully and never forget this. Drawing fast is important; there’s no doubt about that. But shooting straight and true is just as important. I’ve seen my share of gunfights and you wouldn’t want to know how many times the quicker man lay dead in the street. Sure, if you’re *that* much faster than the guy you’re facing, you might get off another shot before he pulls the trigger, but not many men are *that* fast. You have to make your first shot count every time, understand?”

“Got it, Pa.”

“Also remember this,” continued John. “Most men just don’t have nerves of steel. They’re afraid of dying even though they won’t admit it. When it comes down to the last second before the draw most men will be sweating bullets, or pissing themselves. A lot of times their first shot goes astray and the next thing you know, their laying dead in the street. You have to be cold and deliberate in your draw. You have to focus on your target and make that first shot count or it just might be your last.”

“How’d you get to know so much about gunfighting, Pa?”

“Watching a lot of people who thought they were real fast get shot real dead.”

“I guess I’m lucky to have a good teacher, Pa.”

“Just remember what I said about making that first shot count. I’m going to go up and have a cup of coffee and another slice of that pie with your ma. You can stay down here a few more minutes but then you hit the sack, okay? You have chores to do in the morning and I need to send you to town tomorrow for some supplies.”

“Okay, thanks, Pa.” John turned and started to head up to the house.

“Hey, Pa?”

“Yeah?” John replied, as he stopped and turned back to Jess.

“You think maybe you could ask Ma if I could have another slice of that apple pie before I turn in?”

“Sure, son. Hard as you work around here, you deserve it.” Jess smiled. John walked back up to the house leaving Jess there by the creek. He was still surprised about how fast Jess could draw that wooden pistol but he admitted to himself silently that he shouldn’t be. That kind of speed was born and bred into the boy.

Jess thought a lot about what his pa had told him, especially about how some men were quicker on the draw but still lost a gunfight by missing with their first shot. He practiced for another fifteen minutes or so and he took real care to imagine that he was shooting straight at his target. He drew his gun several times very slow and deliberate to make sure that he was doing it just right. He figured he’d had enough and headed for the stables to put his gun away and his mind wandered to his trip into town tomorrow. He had always liked going to town. He especially liked picking out the penny candy at the general store with the penny his ma would always give him.

As he slowly fell off to sleep, he imagined he was drawing his pistol slow and deliberate. He imagined that he was a sheriff in a big town and that he had to stop a gunfight and...