

Chapter Two

Jess woke at the first sign of daylight. He dressed and headed for the barn and stables. He threw hay, did some milking and picked some fresh eggs for breakfast. John was in the stables messing around with the saddles and changing some cinches. He planned to start plowing up a few extra acres today, for planting. Becky was now up and cooking breakfast. Jess could smell the bacon all the way out in the barn and his stomach was growling. While he was picking eggs in the chicken coop, Samantha came in and started bothering the hens.

“Samantha, stop fooling around and make yourself useful for a change,” Jess hollered. “Here, take these eggs in to Ma for breakfast.”

Samantha stopped and looked at him as if she could drill a hole right through his head with her stare. Then, she smiled and politely said, “okay.”

Jess was a little startled by her reaction, but glad to see her finally willing to do something productive. Jess finished up in the coop, and then heard his ma call everyone for breakfast. He was more than ready for some bacon and eggs. Just as he stepped out of the coop, he heard a crunch under his boot. When he lifted his boot he discovered a smashed egg. Samantha had put it right in his path knowing he would either step on it, or have to carry it in to the house. He shook his head.

When Jess got to the table, everyone else was already filling their plates. Becky had cooked bacon, eggs, ham, biscuits and honey, and it all looked good. After finishing up his plate and taking another swallow of his coffee, John looked up at Jess.

“Jess, don’t you forget you have to go into town today and pick up some supplies. Your ma’s got the list, and put it on credit at the general store. You stop in and see Sheriff Diggs and ask him if he needs any more steaks.”

“Okay, Pa. I’ll make sure to see him.” Jess went out and got the wagon hooked up to The Paint and went in to get the list from his ma.

“Now don’t spend too much time down by the creek on your way into town, Jess. I need those supplies back here in good time so I can get them all put away and have supper ready in time. You know how your pa can be if supper is late.”

“I won’t be late, Ma, I promise.”

Jess climbed up into the wagon and slapped the reins on the rear of The Paint and headed out for town. It was about a five-mile ride into town and Jess enjoyed every mile of it. The road to town was a winding one and it followed Black Creek almost all the way. About three miles into the trip, Jess spotted his favorite stop on his trip. The Creek made a sharp turn about ten feet from the road and there was a deep pool there. The pool was about ten feet deep and there was a large boulder the size of the wagon on the roadside of the river. Jess pulled over and tied The Paint to a large branch of a tree next to the river and hopped off the wagon. He checked up and down the road and seeing no one at all in either direction, he quickly stripped off his clothes and boots and climbed up on the boulder and jumped straight down into the deep pool of water. The water was cold but not too cold for Jess. He loved it. He swam to shore and climbed back on the boulder and repeated the jump several more times before he was satisfied.

When he was done, he shook off all the water he could and sat on the boulder for a few minutes to dry off. He got himself dressed and walked over to the wagon and reached in behind the seat and got out three big carrots he had picked fresh this morning and he washed them off in the creek. The Paint was stomping his right hoof. Jess fed him the carrots and rubbed his forehead for a minute.

Jess untied the Paint and got back in the wagon and headed into town. He hadn’t gotten but a few hundred feet when he noticed a cloud of dust off in the distance. It looked as if someone was coming up the road from town. Jess watched the cloud of dust getting closer and closer. The road was lined with just enough trees that he couldn’t make out what was coming. Finally, between the trees, he spotted three riders. Several moments passed before Jess rounded the last curve in the road before meeting up with them.

There were three men, on horseback. Jess reigned in The Paint and stopped the wagon. The three men rode right up to the front of The Paint and stopped. They didn't say anything at first; they just looked over Jess and looked at one another. Jess could tell right off that he didn't like these men. There was something about them that he couldn't put his finger on, but he always had a quick first impression of people and his first impression of these three was anything but nice. The man in the middle was the youngest. He looked to be in his early twenties. He wore a set of six-guns that were strapped low and tied down. He was the best looking one of the three. He was either a gunfighter or someone who wanted to look like one. The man to Jess's left was older, probably in his thirties. He wore a single six-shooter in a left-handed holster. The man had a bushy beard and looked like he needed a dip in the river to clean up.

The man to Jess's right was by far the oldest. He was probably in his late forties or early fifties. He was clean looking with a neatly trimmed mustache. He had a yellow bandanna around his neck, and he had what looked like a new pair of boots on. He was wearing a six-shooter, but Jess noticed that he also had a double-barreled shotgun lying across his lap. Jess wondered if he rode like that all the time or if he had taken it out only because he had seen someone coming. The older man had somewhat of a smile but Jess's first impression of him was the same as that of the other two men. He didn't like him. The older man spoke first.

"Where you going, boy?"

"Just going into town to get supplies."

"What kind of supplies, kid?" the youngest one asked.

"I got a list," replied Jess in a sharp tone.

"Kind of mouthy for a boy your age," said the grubby one with the bushy beard. The older man took over the conversation again.

"You from around here, boy?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Down the road, that way," Jess said pointing backwards but not taking his eyes off the three men.

"You got family, boy?" asked the older man.

"Yes."

"They live down the road, that way, too?" the older man asked, as he nodded in the direction Jess had pointed in.

"Yes."

"You're not very friendly, are you boy?"

"Not with strangers."

"Hell, we ain't strangers," the youngest one retorted, "we been talking now for almost a whole minute! Hell, that almost makes us friends!"

"We ain't friends."

The youngest one sat up straight up in his saddle and said in a low voice, "I ought to tan your hide, boy." Jess said nothing. After glaring at the youngest one with a look that said shut up, the oldest of the three looked straight at Jess.

"You sure ain't very neighborly, boy. We're just trying to be friendly and all."

"You don't seem very friendly to me. Besides, I got to get to town else I'll be late getting back and my pa will be sore at me."

"Maybe we'll stop and see your pa and tell him what bad manners you got, boy," the youngest one said.

"My pa ain't got no time for strangers, he's too busy."

Jess slapped the reins on The Paint and The Paint responded by walking right through the three men who had been sitting in their saddles in a straight line across the road. The oldest man moved to the creek side and the other two moved over to the left just enough for Jess to get through. As Jess was passing the two men on his left, he glanced over in their direction. Not directly at them though, keeping his eyes low as if he was looking at the ground. He could see both of them clearly out of his side vision, especially the one that looked like a gunslinger. That's when Jess noticed something odd. The youngest man's left boot heel was missing. They were old boots, but Jess wondered why he hadn't gotten the boot fixed in town. After a minute or so, Jess looked back. The three men were still sitting in the road watching him and talking to one another. He was sure going to tell Sheriff Diggs about these hooligans when he got to town. When he looked back a second time, the three men had turned their horses and continued down the road. *Good riddance*, Jess thought.

As Jess rounded the last turn and headed down the main street of town, he finally relaxed. He was worried that the three men might come after him and tan his hide like they had threatened. He looked back one more time and saw nothing. The town was busy with activity. He headed straight for Smythes general store and he tied the wagon up in the back of the store. He walked around the front of the store and went in.

"Hey, Jess, how are you and the rest of the family?" asked Jim Smythe.

"They're just dandy, sir. Pa sent me in to pick up some supplies. I got the list here." Jess handed the list to Jim and Jim went about picking the stuff out for Jess and stacking it in wooden boxes for Jess to carry out.

"You going to look over that candy today?" Jim asked, looking in the direction of the front counter where he displayed all the hard candy in nice clear jars.

"Yes, sir!" Jess replied with a huge smile. "I'll pick some out when I get back. Right now I have to go and see Sheriff Diggs for Pa."

"He might be a little cranky just yet. He had to run three drifters out of town this morning. Also, that hotheaded Red Carter came into town last night and kept the saloon open all night. He got himself pretty tanked and started a fight in Andy's saloon with one of the hands from the Hansen Ranch not more than a half-hour ago. He had to lock Red up. Red wasn't too happy about the sheriff cracking his skull with the butt of that shotgun the sheriff carries."

Jess stopped and turned around before he had gotten to the front door. "I bet it was the same three men I met on the road coming in."

"Probably was, they rode out that way."

"I was going to tell the sheriff about them anyway. I didn't like none of them."

"Not much to like."

"Why did the sheriff run them three out of town?"

"He figured them for trouble, just from the looks of them. He never let them get off their horses. He met them in the street with that shotgun of his and told them they weren't welcome to stop and to keep on riding. Besides, he knew that Red was already pretty tanked up at the saloon and that the three drifters would end up at the saloon for a drink and then the sheriff would be picking up some bodies. You know how that Red is, thinks he's the fastest thing in these here parts."

"Yeah, and one day he'll get himself shot, that's for sure," replied Jess.

Red Carter was the only son of one of the biggest ranches in the area, the Carter 'D' it was called, and he *was* pretty fast with a pistol. He had gotten into a gunfight a few years ago against some drifter who challenged Red after Red won his money in a hot game of five-card stud. Red planted a bullet in the drifter's chest before the man got off a shot. Then, last year the drifter's brother came to town to settle up the score and Red disposed of him even easier. That officially made Red a gunslinger. Most of the town was afraid of him and steered clear of him when he was in town.

Jess walked out the front and headed for Sheriff Diggs's office. When he opened the door, the sheriff was filling out some papers. His double-barreled shotgun was lying across his desk, always within easy reach. Jess saw Red lying on the bunk in the cell sleeping it off.

"Howdy, Sheriff," Jess said as he entered the Jail.

The sheriff looked up and smiled at Jess. He had always liked Jess. He had always liked his mom Becky too. Not in a romantic way at all, more like a father. Everyone in town knew not to mess with Becky or they would have to answer to the sheriff.

"Well, how's my favorite young fellow?"

"Just fine, sir, and you? I heard you was having a bad day."

"I was, until you came through that door. What are you doing in town?"

"Just getting supplies for my pa."

"How's your pa, and how is my little Becky?"

"They're both just dandy, Sheriff."

"That's good to hear, son."

"Oh, I think I'm just gonna puke or something listening to you two carry on," Red Carter said while propping himself up on the bunk. "My head hurts like hell, Sheriff."

"You're lucky I didn't take that empty head of yours clean off. I've about had it with you coming into town causing trouble."

"You ever hit me again with that shotgun and I swear I'll kill you, Sheriff!" Red threatened.

“Just lay back down and shut your yap before it gets you into more trouble. You can stay in there for another day now just for getting smart with me.” Red grumbled something under his breath, but the sheriff wasn’t even listening to him. He had turned back to Jess. “Your pa cutting up some more steaks soon?”

“Yes, sir. He told me to ask you if you wanted some.”

“You bet. Tell you pa to cut me up a few extra this time would you?”

“Yes, sir, I sure will,” said Jess. “Sheriff, I ran into three men on the way into town this morning. I think they must of been the same ones you chased out of town earlier.”

“How’d you hear about them?”

“From Mr. Smythe at the general store.”

“Well, stay away from them if you run into them again, they’re nothing but trouble, I’m sure of it. I’ve been looking through my wanted posters.”

“Last I seen of them, they were headed down the road towards my pa’s ranch. I hope they don’t cause my pa any trouble,” Jess said, a worried look on his face.

“They probably just kept riding, heading for the next town. I’ll tell you what though. After I finish up a few more things here, I’ll ride out past your pa’s ranch and make sure that things are okay.”

“Thanks, Sheriff.”

Jess felt a little better. He left the sheriff’s office and walked back to the general store. Mr. Smythe had everything in one pile and Jess made quick work of loading up the wagon. He went back in to get the bill to take to his pa and Jim’s eyes darted over to the candy counter as he handed Jess the bill.

“Well, you going to pick out a few pieces?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Jess said, not showing his usual enthusiasm for the candy counter.

“What’s a matter, Jess?”

“Oh, I guess I’m a little worried about my folks. Those three troublemakers were headed in the direction of my pa’s ranch after I ran into them. I got a little smart with them and they said maybe they were going to stop and tell my pa about my manners. I hope they don’t cause my pa no trouble.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much. Besides, there are several ranches in the area. How are they going to know for sure which one is your pa’s, anyway?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Besides, the sheriff said he would ride out to check on them later to make sure they’re gone.”

“Well, there you go then. Come on, the candy’s on me this time, and take one for your sister Samantha too.”

“Thanks,” Jess said as he picked out three different flavors of sugar sticks. Two sticks for him and one for his sister. “I sure am grateful.”

“You’re welcome. Tell your ma I said hi.”

“Sure will,” Jess said as he headed out the back of the store and got back in the wagon.

As Jess headed out of town he found himself worrying more and more about those three men he met on the way into town. He saw the sheriff at the end of the main street talking to a merchant and he waved to Jess. Jess waved back and hoped that the sheriff wouldn’t forget about checking to see if the three men had left the area. The Paint was walking a normal pace and Jess slapped the reins on The Paint and he responded with a gait. Jess wanted to get home a little quicker. There would be no stop at the creek on the way back this time. He had a bad feeling and he just couldn’t shake it off.