

## Chapter Four

Jess tossed and turned that night. His mind replayed the horrors over and over again. He woke several times and each time he did, Sara was right there to comfort him. He woke to the smell of fresh brewed coffee and bacon. For a brief moment, when he first opened his eyes, he hoped it was all just a bad dream. Then he realized where he was and it all came back to him again in a rush. He just stared at the ceiling. He wasn't sure *how* he could, or even *if* he could deal with what had happened. Then his thoughts turned to the people responsible. He knew he had to see justice done. He didn't quite know how yet. He only knew that he had to make things right. There would be plenty of time to figure it all out. For now, he had to survive. He had to figure out what to do today, next week, next month. He was a planner in life, just like his pa. He got dressed and splashed his face with some cool clean water that Sara had left in a bowl on the table by his bed. It felt good. As he lifted his head up in the mirror and reached for a hand-towel, he noticed something different about the way he looked. It was surely his reflection in the mirror, but it didn't quite look like him. He was different in some odd sort of way that he couldn't quite put his finger on. He headed down the stairs to the kitchen and Jim was sitting at the table sipping some hot coffee, an empty but dirty plate in front of him.

Sara was standing over the hot stove and when she heard Jess come into the room she turned around to see him.

"How about some eggs and bacon, Jess?"

"I don't know, I'm not sure I'm hungry yet."

"Jess, you haven't eaten since early yesterday, you've got to be mighty hungry," said Jim.

"Well, I guess I am."

"Then let Sara fix you a plate of vittles. You've still got to eat."

"Well...I guess." Sara put a plate of eggs, bacon and biscuits in front of Jess.

"Thanks, ma'am."

"You're welcome, Jess. If you need anything else, you just say so." Jess picked up a biscuit and began to pull it apart. *I guess I won't be getting any more of my ma's biscuits*, he thought to himself. Sara had fixed herself a plate and sat down next to Jess hoping that she could coax him into eating something.

"It sure looks good," said Jess, "but I just can't seem to eat much. If you'll excuse me, I'd like to go out and sit out on the back steps." Jess got up from the table and looked at his plate and then looked over at Sara.

"Sorry, ma'am," he said.

"It's okay, Jess. I understand. You go ahead out and you can eat whenever you're ready."

"Thanks."

Jess walked out the back hallway, which ran parallel with the steps going up to the second floor, and out the back door and sat on the steps. The view behind the store was less than exceptional. There was junk cluttered all around. The view off in a distance was much more pleasing. He could see rolling hills, most of them covered with trees. As he viewed the scenery he realized to himself that the men who had killed his family could be hiding in those hills right now. *There is no place on earth that you can hide*, he thought. He began to imagine tracking each one of the three men across the country and killing them. He had always imagined being the hero and shooting it out with the bad guy but this was different. This time, it felt more like a plan than an idea. This time, *it felt real*. He didn't even realize it yet, but his subconscious was mapping out his destiny and his future.

Sara slowly picked at her eggs while looking down the hallway, watching Jess on the back porch. Sara had always loved Jess. Jim and Sara had not been able to have their own children and Sara had always been partial to Jess.

"It's hard to even imagine what that boy is going through," said Sara.

"I know," replied Jim. "Sara, did you notice something different about Jess this morning? I mean...I know his family being murdered and all has him upset, but...something else, something...well...different. I swear, he even looks older to me this morning."

Sara hung her head and closed her eyes. You could see the tears trying to well up in her eyes. Sara looked up at Jim and with a broken voice said, "last night, we put a fourteen year old grieving boy to bed. But this morning, there is a fourteen-year-old man with hatred and raw vengeance in his heart sitting on our back steps. I'm afraid for him, Jim, deathly afraid."

"I felt it too, Sara. Something has changed him inside. We'll just have to help him as much as we can. That's all we can do."

Sara was crying quietly, She didn't want Jess to hear her. Women had an intuition that men lacked. She could feel in her soul what was manifesting itself in this fourteen-year-old boy and she knew that there was nothing that she or anyone else in this world could do to stop it. She knew this boy, who had become a man overnight, would never have anything near a normal life. He would never know the joys that most young men experienced. He wouldn't get to go fishing with his pa. He would never get to play with his sister again or anyone else for that matter. She knew exactly what was going to become of this innocent child. She mourned for him. More than for his family who would all be buried in the ground today. His family had all lost their lives. Jess, however, had lost his very soul.

The burial went as well as burials go. Jim gathered up a few of the townspeople and the preacher, and hauled the bodies of John, Becky and Samantha back out to the ranch to be buried in the little cemetery plot that John had spotted that very first night he had stayed on his land. The graves were dug in silence and the bodies placed in their gravesites. The preacher said a prayer over each of them and some of the men from the town filled in the graves. Someone had fixed up three wooden crosses for the graves and Jim pounded them into the ground. Sara cried the whole time. Jess, however, watched all of this in total silence. He never spoke a word nor shed another tear. It was as if he had already let them go and this was all just a formality.

Jim came up beside him and put his hand on Jess's shoulder.

"We should be getting back to town, Jess, there's no more we can do. The Lord will take care of them now."

"I'm not going back, I'm staying right here," replied Jess.

"Jess, you can't stay and run this ranch. There's too much to do for one man, much less a fourteen-year-old boy," Jim said.

"I'm not a boy anymore, *they* took care of that," Jess replied, not really signifying who *they* were, but Jim and Sara both knew.

"I know, Jess," argued Jim, "but taking care of a ranch is an awful lot of responsibility to take on. Are you sure you're ready for all that?"

"I guess I'll have to be."

Jim shook his head in frustration. "Okay, Jess. But you promise that if you have any trouble or need any help, you'll let us know, okay?"

"I will...I promise."

"The sheriff will be back in a day or so. We'll let him know that you're out here. Is there anything else we can do for you right now?"

"No. I just need some time to myself."

"Okay then. Just don't forget, if you need anything..." Sara took Jim's arm and Jim knew that meant for him to shut up.

"Thanks for all your help. I won't forget it, you can be sure of that. Pa always told me to repay kindness with the same."

"Your pa was a smart man, Jess, and a damn good one. We're all going to miss him and your ma, and Samantha too," Jim said. "We won't forget them."

"I won't forget either," Jess said as he turned his stare from the gravesites to the rolling hills out past the field that his pa was plowing when he was shot down in his tracks. "I won't *ever* forget," he said to no one but himself.

"Well, we best be going, Jess. You take care, you hear?" Jess nodded. Jim and Sara got into the back of the preacher's wagon and the other few townspeople rode out with the Blacksmith back to town. Jess found himself all alone for the first time in his life. It was a strange feeling. He didn't like it, but he knew that he had to get used to it. Jess sat down in front of the three fresh gravesites. He must have sat there for better than an hour. He kept thinking about how he and Samantha always fought and how she used

to aggravate him to no end. He wished she were here to do it again. He remembered his ma and how she always was there to help him with anything. His thoughts turned to his pa. How he had finally come down to the creek to teach him how to draw the wooden pistol his pa had carved for him. He was just going to have to finish learning all by himself. But not with the wooden pistol his pa had carved. No, he would have to begin to practice with his pa's .45 that was in the box under his pa's bed. Before, it was just a challenge to see how fast he could draw. Now, there was a *need*. He had to learn to be the best. Without really knowing or planning it, his mind was formulating a mission. He would hunt down the people who had so savagely murdered his entire family, and kill them, one by one. And there would be no mercy. These people deserved none. He would kill them and in the most vicious way he could. They would suffer. His pa had always told him there were some pretty bad people in the world but he never realized just how bad. People that bad had no right to live as far as he was concerned.

Jess finally got up and said a little prayer over his family. After the prayer, he made his solemn promise to them. He made an oath that he would not rest until he tracked down and killed everyone responsible for their deaths. He walked back up to the house and went inside. Someone had cleaned up the large pool of blood where his ma's body had hung, only a dark stain remaining.

The smell of food surprised him. There was a fire in the stove and Jess found some fried chicken in a pot along with some biscuits. *Sara*. She was a good person and he was thankful to know her. He wouldn't go hungry tonight, but tomorrow he would have to fend for himself. He would have to do everything by himself now. He felt the loneliness begin to set in. He decided he would go out and finish plowing the field his pa had started on first thing in the morning. He figured that he would have to run the ranch for the next year or so. Then, he would ride out and carry out the oath he had made to his family. He would wait to see if the sheriff caught those responsible or not. If he did, they would hang, and he would watch. If not, he would take care of it himself. Deep within himself, he hoped for the latter.

He finished the meal and then noticed that there was a pie sitting by the window. It was an apple pie. *Sara*. Jess decided to have some later. Right now, he figured he would go and check the stock and throw some extra hay and then go down to the creek and practice with his pa's pistol.

He headed out to the barn and threw some hay. He turned around to put the pitchfork back into the pile when he noticed a slight glimmer coming off to his right. The reflection was coming from the wall where his pa had always hung his hat. What he saw, hanging on the peg under his pa's hat was the most spectacular and unusual looking revolver and holster rig he had ever seen. He walked over to it and picked it up. The holster was brown and had a finish to it he had never seen on any leather before. The quality was astonishing. On the back of the holster was a name stamped into the leather. "BOB MERNICKLE CUSTOM HOLSTERS." He also read the words "MADE IN CANADA." Another unusual feature of the holster is that it had no place to hold bullets. The revolver had a polished finish on it that was as perfect as could be. He lifted the gun and holster up carefully to get a close look at it.

Jess strapped the holster on and it fit as if it were made for him. The gun sat in the holster and the holster was as rigid as steel. The holster held the pistol a little out from his leg. The gun rode on Jess's right leg perfectly. The holster didn't cover as much of the gun as most holsters. There was a nice one-inch wide leg strap that fit Jess's leg perfectly. Jess un-hooked the trigger-loop and pulled the gun out. The first thing he noticed was how easy the gun seemed to glide out of the holster. It was as if the holster was greased, but it wasn't. He reached inside the holster and felt the inside and it had a real smooth feel to it and it was harder than normal, which allowed the gun to glide out of the holster easier. Then he noticed that there were no front or rear sights on the gun. He looked over the gun and noticed some printing stamped on it. On one side by the trigger he read the words RUGER *BLACKHAWK* .41 MAGNUM CAL. On the other side of the gun was a number: 40-01079. The handgrips were made out of some type of material he had never seen before. It looked like some type of horn material and the grips flared out at the bottom so as to make the gun extremely easy to grip.

Jess decided to take the gun into the house to study it some more. *Where the hell did it come from? Was it his pa's? How did it come to hang on the peg in the barn?* He looked outside first to make sure no one was around to see what he had found and he almost ran to the house. When he got there, he placed the gun and holster on the kitchen table. He sat there for several minutes trying to take this all in and wondering where this unusual gun came from. He picked it up again. The gun was extremely light compared with the few pistols he had ever been able to hold. His pa's gun was a Colt .45 Peacemaker and he figured it had to weigh twice as much as this gun. Jess didn't know much about pistols but he knew after handling this one for a few minutes that it was like no other pistol he had ever seen. This was something unique and special. Yes, this was a special gun...*but how did it come to be in my barn...and why now?* Jess knew that he would

have to keep this gun and holster hidden. He peeked outside and quickly went back to the barn and climbed up the ladder to the top floor. There were some wooden boxes that his pa kept there and he gently placed the gun and holster into one of the boxes and placed some more boxes around it to hide it.

He went back to the house and decided to have some of the apple pie Sara had left him. Before he cut it, he decided to make himself some coffee to go with it. His pa had let him drink coffee once in awhile but he figured that he could drink it whenever he wanted now. The coffee was strong but good, and the pie was even better. As he sat there he thought some more about the pistol. Jess always figured there was a reason for everything that happened in life. *Was there a reason for this? Was there some special meaning for him to have found this pistol on the day he had buried his entire family and pledged an oath to them to kill the persons responsible for their deaths? And who put it there?* It couldn't have been his pa's or it wouldn't have been hanging on a peg in the barn, it would have been in the box with his pa's other gun.

By now, the sun was getting low in the sky. Jess decided against practicing this late and decided to turn in early tonight. He had a field to plow come morning. He had some more coffee and then he went into his pa's room and got the shotgun from the corner and took it into his bedroom along with a few extra shells. If anyone tried to bother him tonight, or the killers returned, he would be ready. He would never be surprised by anyone like his family had, that was for sure. He promised himself that he would always have a gun by his side at all times and always be on the ready. As he fell off to sleep, he imagined that he was tracking the killers of his family across the country. And he saw the pistol he found in the barn strapped to his waist. It looked like it belonged there.

He dreamed that night, but not nightmares. He dreamed good dreams of his family. He woke often through the night as he would for the rest of his life. The slightest sound would awaken him. His senses seemed more aware without him really knowing it. He would always be ready...always.