

Chapter Five

Jess woke before sunrise. Before he got out of the bed, he thought about the pistol up in the barn. All the same thoughts about the pistol and holster ran through his head again. He cooked himself some breakfast made up of eggs and bacon. He wanted to have his eggs sunny-side up but he couldn't quite break the eggs without breaking the yolks. The scrambled eggs tasted pretty good. He thought he would have to learn how to make biscuits or some kind of bread. While he ate he thought of all the things he would have to do on his own, including cooking, feeding and caring for the livestock and all the other work associated with running a ranch. It was sure enough a lot of responsibility. He continued to plan out what he would do. He decided at breakfast that he would run the ranch for the next two years, give or take a month or so. He would be a little over sixteen, and by that time, he planned to be the quickest draw with a pistol anyone had ever seen. And, during that time he would plant crops and sell them. He would sell off all the livestock and stash away all the money from that and use it to do what he had planned. Hunt the killers of his family down. He would not sell the ranch. He would keep that just in case he was able to come back someday and run it again. He finished breakfast and headed out to do the chores before he started plowing the field.

It was a hot dusty day and he never figured plowing a field was such work. He earned a new respect for his pa. Time passed pretty fast since he was deep in thought about all that had happened to him. He thought about the pistol and what it meant for him. It was just after high noon and he decided to stop and eat. After eating a simple meal of ham and a piece of apple pie, he went back at it again. When he finished for the day, he walked back to the house after throwing some hay and looked at the blisters beginning on his hands. He figured that he had better wear the leather gloves his pa had in the barn or else he wouldn't be able to practice drawing in the evening, and that was something that he had promised himself he would do every night. After dinner, he went into his pa's room and got the wooden box out from under the bed. He took it to the table and opened it up. Inside, he found his pa's Colt .45 Peacemaker and the holster to go with it. He also found four boxes of .45 ammo in the bottom of the box. He strapped the gun and holster on and went down to the creek. Even with the blisters he practiced for two hours straight. The first hour and a half he drew and dry fired the gun. Then, he loaded the pistol and spent the last half-hour using live ammo. He noticed a real difference using live ammo. The gun kicked pretty hard and he had to make adjustments for that. His practice took on a new fervor. It was not just a game to see how quick he could draw. Now it was something he had to do to make sure that he survived. All the while, he kept thinking about the pistol he found. He decided that tomorrow he would start practicing with both his pa's pistol and the one he had found in the barn.

When he finished practicing he took his pa's gun and holster and put it back in the house. Then, he climbed up in the top of the barn and looked at the pistol and holster he had found. He marveled at its uniqueness and quality. He strapped it on and practiced drawing it a few times and it felt good, really good. It just seemed to glide out of the holster like lightning. It felt as if it were custom made just for him. The holster didn't come up high on the gun, leaving the gun more exposed than usual, allowing the end of the barrel to clear the holster quickly. He noticed that the trigger guard had been somehow shaved down to allow his finger to get to the trigger easier and that even the trigger itself was about three times as wide as the trigger on his pa's .45.

He decided to take it into the house with him and keep it there with his pa's rig. Then he had another piece of apple pie and some coffee before turning in. As he lay there that night, he figured that he would practice with his pa's pistol for the first part of his practice every night and then switch to the new pistol for the rest of his practice. The next day found him back out plowing the field. He was really making good progress. It was just before noon when he noticed a dust cloud out on the main road. He stopped and reached over to grab his pa's rifle out of the scabbard that he kept strapped to the horse. The Winchester 44-40 still looked like new. He also had his pa's double-barreled shotgun tied to the horse. He was not to be unprepared, ever. He watched the group of riders turn down the ranch road. He counted four of them. He

decided to switch to the shotgun and he leaned the rifle up against the plow-frame. He decided right then and there that he would get his father's Colt .45 Peacemaker out from under the bed tonight and wear it from morning till night while working the ranch. He finally caught a glimpse of who was approaching. It was Sheriff Diggs with three other men, probably men who had volunteered for posse work. They rode right up to the plow rig and Jess walked around the rig after putting the shotgun down.

"Hi, Jess," the sheriff said. "I sure didn't expect to find you out here and especially never expected to see you working the field. Hell, I thought someone was trying to squat and I'd have to run him off. I figured you would be still at Jim and Sara's. You expecting trouble?" the sheriff asked, nodding at the rifle and shotgun leaning on the plow.

"I wasn't expecting any but if there was, I'd be ready for it. I decided to stay here and work the ranch. Got to be a man and do a man's work now, Sheriff. They didn't leave me much choice about that the way I figure." The sheriff knew who *they* were. "I reckon you didn't find them unless you had to kill them and bury their carcasses out on the trail."

"No such luck, Jess. I would have loved to bury the bastards if I could've found them, but they had too much of a head start on us. We did find out who they were with the help of some other unfortunate people they had robbed not more than ten miles from here. I also got some news from the sheriff in a little town about twenty miles east of here. They stopped there for a drink and someone overheard them bragging on how they killed some people and raped some women." Jess straightened up stiff. "By the time the sheriff took a look at them and went back to his office and checked some wanted posters, they were gone like a bad habit. The sheriff didn't have any wanted posters but he did get a look at them and he gave me a pretty good description. We had a local artist in town draw up some posters and I showed them to the couple that was robbed and they were able to identify all three of them. I plan on sending copies out to every town that has any law at all. I had some copies made up at a local newspaper office. I need you to look at them to see if they are the same three men you met on the road."

Jess took the drawings from the sheriff and he looked at them. Jess has a cold look in his eyes as he stared at the pictures of the men. It was the same three men. Their faces had been burned into his memory since the very first day he had seen them. He had wondered if they had been the men responsible and now he knew for sure. They were the ones...and they were still on the loose.

"The youngest one," the sheriff continued as Jess looked over the drawings, "is Randy Hastings. They call him Rand and near as anyone can tell he is in his mid twenties, maybe a little older. He's the one with the missing boot heel, although I imagine he's either fixed it by now or stole another pair. He carries two six-guns with pearl handles. The other one is Blake Taggart, about thirty-five. He's got a bushy beard unless he's shaved it off by now, but I doubt it. He carries a left-handed six-shooter. The oldest one is Frank Beard. A tall man, with a mustache, and he's cleaner than most men. He always wears a yellow bandana, although no one really knows why. He carries a six-shooter but his specialty is a double-barreled shotgun. Hear tell, he's killed several men with it."

Jess looked up at the sheriff. "These are the three men that I met on the road, Sheriff. I'm sure of it. I will never forget their faces. The pictures are a good likeness, that's for sure. Can I keep these?"

"Of course," Sheriff Diggs replied. "Jess, is there anything else I can do for you right now? Can we help with some of the work here? Running a ranch is a lot of responsibility for..." the sheriff hesitated for a minute before finishing his sentence... "for a young man."

"Thanks, Sheriff," Jess replied, "but I can take care of the ranch and myself just fine. I don't have any choice about it any more the way I see it. If I do need any help, I'm not afraid to ask for it."

"All right, then. You take care, Jess." The sheriff and his three deputies started to turn their horses around when Jess asked Sheriff Diggs the one question the sheriff had hoped he would never ask and yet, somehow he knew that he would.

"Sheriff...you said they bragged about raping some women...meaning more than one. Does that mean..." Jess's voice broke for a second before he could finish... "Does that mean that they raped..." his eyes went to the ground as he summoned up the courage to ask. "Does that mean they raped my little sister Samantha?"

Sheriff Diggs's eyes looked to the ground right along with Jess's. He didn't want to answer the question but there was no way he could avoid it, he knew that in his heart. Jess deserved to know the truth no matter how terrible. He looked up and when he did, Jess looked up with him in unison and their eyes locked. The sheriff was a man who always figured the truth was the best way out of a bad situation. He looked Jess straight in the eyes and told Jess the cold terrible truth.

“Yes. I had hoped not to have to tell you about it, Jess. But the truth is that those bastards did rape Samantha. That’s why I was hoping to bury those rotten sons of bitches in the ground before I came back. I’m sorry to have to tell you that, Jess.”

Jess’s eyes glazed over, but he did not cry, nor did he shed a tear. But the sheriff had seen the look that Jess had in his eyes more than once in his lifetime. He knew the look. Rage, revenge, love, hate, all wrapped up in one look. He saw it in these eyes of a boy not yet fifteen. He knew what Jess had on his mind and he knew there was nothing that he or anyone else for that matter could do to change it. Jess never changed his look or never lost his lock on the sheriff’s eyes. All he said was, “thank you, Sheriff, for all you did to help. I do appreciate it and I’m sure my family would too.”

“You’re welcome, Jess. I only wish I could have done more.”

“That’s okay, you’re a good man, Sheriff, and I figure I owe you. I know you’ve done your best. I’ll take care of it from here.”

The sheriff didn’t have to try to figure out what that meant. He knew exactly what Jess was thinking about. He only hoped with a little time and a chance to talk to Jess that he could talk Jess out of what he was thinking. Sheriff Diggs and his men turned around their horses and headed back down the ranch road out to the road leading to town. As they did the other three men with the sheriff tipped their hats at Jess as if to say they understood what he felt. Jess simply nodded back. As the men rode one of them looked at the sheriff with a worried look on his face.

“Did you see what that boy had in his eyes? I ain’t never seen such rage and coldness in any man’s eyes, much less a boy.”

“I know,” replied the sheriff, “but he ain’t no boy anymore. Christ, it’s only been a few days since I’ve seen him and I swear he looks five years older. And by the look in his eyes, he’ll goddamn do it, that’s for sure. I’ve seen that look before and it ain’t a good look. I wouldn’t want to be any of those three bastards.”

Jess watch the sheriff and his three deputies ride off down the main road until they were out of sight. He went back to plowing the field as if nothing had happened. He thought of his sister Samantha. He thought of the fear and helplessness she must have went through, as she was being raped and murdered. He could hardly contain the rage within him but he continued to plow, never stopping. He would take the rage and turn it inward only to be let loose at the right moment. That would give him the extra edge he would need to do what he had to do. The rage would fuel him. The rage would keep him from being hungry or thirsty. The rage would keep him going when he was tired. The rage would always be his edge.

He finished his plowing for the day. After he put the stock away and finished his work, he walked back up to the house. Before he got to the porch, he stopped. There, on the front porch, was a large box. He looked inside. He found several loaves of bread, a dozen biscuits, an apple pie and a big pot of stew. *Sara*. He had been so busy he had never seen her drop it off. She was an angel and he would never forget her kindness. He would also be more watchful because the thought that someone had visited without him knowing about it bothered him.

He finished supper and got his pa’s gun and holster along with the new rig he had found and went out to the creek for his nightly practice. As would become his routine, or ritual actually, he spent the next two hours practicing. First, he practiced with his pa’s gun. He would draw the gun over and over again. Sometimes he thumbed the hammer and sometimes he fanned the hammer. His pa’s gun was much heavier than the other gun and much harder to get out of the holster quickly. He noticed that as soon as he strapped the new gun on, everything worked much smoother and faster. The very design of the new gun and holster made it much easier to be quick. Fanning this gun was easy too since there were no sights on the gun and no firing pin on the hammer. The top of the gun was smooth and there was nothing to catch his fingers except the specially designed hammer that stood straight up past the top of the gun by a half inch. Each time it felt better and better and he seemed to get faster and faster. He knew that speed was not everything. He knew that hitting the target was just as important, if not more. He remembered the stories his pa told him of the men who were faster on the draw but ended up laying face down in the street dead because they missed with their first shot. He knew that his lessons would have to entail using live ammo in the new gun. He looked at the barrel and he opened the side loader. He kept wondering about the .41 MAGNUM CAL. that was stamped on the gun because the gun looked like it took .45 caliber ammo.

He took six shells out of a box of ammo and put them in the revolver. They fit perfectly. He took them back out and even tried to put the lead end one of the bullets into the front of the barrel of the gun and it looked as if it was the correct caliber. Somehow, and he would never find out why, someone had the wrong caliber stamped on this revolver. He loaded the gun again and placed it back in the holster. He drew and

fired at a tree across the creek. He was amazed at how much easier and quicker his draw was with this new gun. He finished his practice with the new gun going through almost fifty rounds of ammo, and went back to the house. After making some coffee to go along with a nice slab of Sara's apple pie, he went to bed with his pa's .45 loaded and next to him on the bed.

He headed into town the next morning. He stopped at the general store and thanked Sara for the food and Jim for all his help. He ordered some supplies that he thought he needed, and some .45 ammo for his pa's gun.

"Why do you need ammo, Jess?" Jim asked.

"Just going to do some target shooting down by the creek."

"You need a dozen boxes for target shooting?" Jim asked skeptically.

"You do if you plan on target shooting a lot. I hope you'll allow me credit like my pa. I'll be able to pay you back, honest. I plan on selling some of the heard later on this year."

"Why of course, Jess. We wouldn't have it any other way. Did you know that your pa has some money in the bank? I'm not saying that so you will pay me in cash, I just thought you should know, Jess."

"No, I never knew my pa had any money saved, much less in a bank. I looked around the house to see if he hid some money, but never thought about the bank."

"Well, you go see Mr. Jameson at the bank and I'm sure he will let you know all about it. It's your money now, Jess, and you're going to need it to get by."

"Thanks Mr. Smythe. I'll do that before I head back."

The bank was small and there were only three windows with one man working the only window open. Mr. Jameson was sitting behind a desk over to the left of the teller windows. As soon as he spotted Jess, he got up immediately.

"Good afternoon, Jess. I'm really sorry about what happened. There sure are some sorry excuses for human beings in this world. What can I do to help you today?"

"Jim Smythe says my pa had money in your bank and that it probably belongs to me. Is that right?"

"That's right, Jess. Why don't we go look at the account and see how much is there. He was a good man, your pa," Jameson said, really meaning it.

"That's nice of you to say, Mr. Jameson, sir."

Jameson went behind his desk and picked out a ledger book from a shelf. He leafed through some pages and found what he was looking for.

"Oh...yes...hmm...here we go," Jameson said in his low banker's voice, "yep, he has...or I guess you have...two hundred, seventy-two dollars, and sixteen cents. Do you need some right now?"

"Well, I don't rightly know just yet." He thought about it for a moment.

"How about me taking fifty dollars out for now? That way I can pay off my pa's bill and pay cash for my supplies. I guess I can use credit when I really have to. Better to pay my way if I can, don't you think?"

"Absolutely. Banks are for borrowing money when you don't have it and credit is for people who can't pay right away. The less you use of either is a good way for a man to live, Jess."

"I agree."

Mr. Jameson filled out a slip of paper for Jess. "Here, take this to the teller and he'll get your money."

"Thanks, Mr. Jameson. You've been a real big help. This will be the only bank I will ever use."

"Why thank you, Jess. That's a mighty nice thing to say."

Jess walked out of the bank and headed to the general store. He loaded up his supplies and paid in cash even over Jim's objections. Jim was a little more than curious when Jess also asked for two-dozen boxes of .45 rounds instead of the original dozen he had asked for when he first came in. Jess figured as long as he had the money, he might as well get plenty. He knew he was going to use it and more.

"Jess, what in the heck you going to do with all this ammo, start some kind of war or something?" asked Jim.

"Not yet, Mr. Smythe. Just going to do some target shooting down at the creek. As a matter of fact, do you have some empty bottles I could have to use for targets?"

"Well...yes. You'll find all you want behind the store, but you be careful with your target shooting, you hear? We don't want anything happening to you."

"Oh, I'll be careful. Honest. My pa was starting to show me how to shoot just before...before...well, you know."

"I know. You just be careful, okay. You promise me," Jim pleaded.

"I can guarantee you this. I plan on being real careful for the rest of my life." Jess picked up the bottles and headed back to the ranch. He finished his work and had supper and went down to the creek with his pa's gun strapped on. He carried the new rig over his left shoulder. He set up some bottles across the creek. Some he stood up on the ground and some were stuck upside down on branches waving in the slight breeze. He began the practice that would become a ritual for the next two years. He would draw the guns several times very slow but very deliberate. That way he made sure that he was doing everything just right. He would dry fire both guns, therefore going through the entire motion. Cocking the pistol on the draw and then squeezing the trigger as he pointed the gun at the target. Then he would load up with ammo and go through the same motions again, firing live rounds. He would do it slowly at first and then finish with fast draws. He would repeat everything over and over again relentlessly. In just a few weeks, he ran out of ammo. He made another run into town to pick up a few supplies and a whole lot more ammo. While he was at the general store, Sheriff Diggs walked in.

"How's my buddy, Jess?" Diggs said, smiling.

"Hi, Sheriff. I'm just fine," Jess replied. Sheriff Diggs counted out the twenty-four boxes of .45 ammo on the counter and gave Jess a curious look.

"Twenty-four boxes of ammo? Jess, what the hell you doing with all this ammo? I hear you're buying poor Jim here clean out."

"I'm just doing some target practice. A man has to learn how to use a gun these days."

"How's it going so far?"

"Pretty good."

"Well, you be careful with guns, Jess. They ain't toys you know."

"I know, sheriff. I'll be careful."

"Especially with that shotgun there," the sheriff said as he nodded to the back of the wagon where Jess had put his pa's .44-.40 rifle and double-barreled shotgun. Not wanting to press it anymore with it only being a few weeks since that horrible day, the sheriff told Jess to have a careful trip back to the ranch and if he needed anything, to let him know. Jess thanked him and headed out. The sheriff turned back to Jim who was working behind the counter.

"Howdy, Sheriff. How you doing? Get you anything?"

"No. Just checking on Jess. He makes me nervous messing with his pa's guns. I don't like him getting that close to a pistol at his age, especially with what's happened and all. There's something going on in that boy's head and I'm not sure it's anything good."

"Hell, Sheriff. His whole family was murdered in cold blood. That would put a change in anyone's life including you, the hard-case you are." The sheriff laughed at that and agreed.

"Well, let me know what he buys from you in the way of ammo, okay? I want to keep an eye on him. He worries me."

"Sure thing, Sheriff. Sara and I only want the best for him too. But he is a man now and he has to find his own way."

"I know. I just don't want it to be the wrong way."

The sheriff walked out and looked down the main street and he could see Jess was just turning the corner out of town. There was a real bad feeling growing up in the back of his head about Jess. Yet, somehow he knew that there was nothing that he could do about it. He knew the boy was holding in a real rage about what had happened to his family, and he understood that. He just wondered how all that rage would find its way out of the young man. Then he slowly hung his head and shuddered inside as he came to the realization that he already knew the answer to that question.