

Chapter Six

For the next two years, Jess pretty much followed a routine. He worked the ranch, taking care of the stock and working the fields. He sold off small groups of cattle here and there and put the money in the bank. He made many trips to town for supplies and ammo. Every evening, he went down to the creek and practiced with his pa's .45 and the new pistol rig. He was getting pretty fast with his pa's gun, but he was like greased lightning when he drew the new gun. His accuracy was getting much better also. He rarely missed a bottle whether it was standing still or even waving in the breeze hanging on a branch. He had even taken to throwing bottles up in the air and hitting them on the way down. He made it more difficult by wearing a hat while looking straight ahead and not up and then only drawing the gun when the bottle came into his field of view. This only gave him a fraction of a second to hit the target. At first, he missed most of the bottles. Later on, he rarely missed one.

He learned to point and shoot accurately. He learned to rapid fire and to fan the trigger, especially the second shot; which would become his trademark. It was a trick that would save his life more than once. He would thumb cock the first shot and then use the middle finger of his left hand to fan the second shot. The two shots were so close together you would almost believe it to be only one shot. He also developed a new technique for drawing the new pistol. His right hand would be at the ready and his left hand would find itself just inches away from the pistol. When he drew, his right hand would pull the gun and pull the trigger while his left index finger snapped the hammer back as he pushed the gun forward ever so slightly. The shot was so fast it was almost unbelievable and when it was finished, the gun was just forward of the holster a few inches and just barely above where the top of the holster was. He would even go upstream and throw several bottles in the creek and run back and wait for them to come into his side view. When they did, he drew and blasted them out of the water, one by one.

The new gun seemed to jump out of the holster with the least of effort. He couldn't quite explain it or even understand it, but the design of the pistol and holster itself, were literally training him to draw faster and with less movement and effort. He transferred some of that training to his pa's rig, making adjustments to his pa's holster to try to match the new holster as much as he could. He was well on his way to being the fastest man to draw a gun. He had an advantage that no other man had. The gun. Without it, he could learn to draw as fast as any of the best. But with it, he would become unbeatable.

Not only did he practice with the pistol; he practiced with the rifle and the shotgun. With the shotgun, he made a special holster that was strapped to his back so that the handle of the shotgun stuck up just over his right shoulder. That way he could draw it out in a hurry and he cut the double barrel a few inches shorter. He even practiced loading both shells in the shotgun in one motion. He even sewed some pockets onto his shirt that held two shotgun shells together that he could grab and load instantly. He had to carry his pistol ammo in his front pants pockets since the holster had no holders for bullets. He didn't understand why, but it didn't matter to him.

He learned to throw a knife. He made a scabbard for the knife and tucked it behind him under the holster and tied it with a small leather tong. He learned to throw it under- or over-handed with equal proficiency. He learned to shoot and throw with both hands. He went through thousands of rounds of ammo in two years.

He continued to work the ranch and the fields. He sold off the crops as they came in. He eventually sold off all the cattle and even sold the bull. During that time, he still worked odd jobs for the townspeople. He even worked for the gunsmith so that he could learn more about weapons. He learned how to properly care for weapons. He worked for the blacksmith mostly for the exercise and to strengthen his hands and arms to grip his weapons better. The blacksmith even taught Jess some hand to hand combat with both knives and fists. Of course, he also earned money that he continually stashed in Jameson's bank. He eventually sold off all the horses. He kept his pa's horse, Gray. The horse was strong and could carry a lot. He wasn't the fastest of the lot but he could outlast most horses on the trail. He couldn't bring himself

to sell The Paint so he gave him to Jim Smythe with a promise from Jim that he would never be sold. Jess knew that he had to travel light and with only the necessary provisions. He needed to be able to travel fast and at a moment's notice, so he decided against a packhorse, at least for now.

During all this time, the sheriff was out to talk to Jess several times. He knew what Jess was planning and he knew it from the start. He also knew that there was no way he could talk Jess out of it. About a week before Jess was ready to head out for the trail he visited Sheriff Diggs. As he walked into the sheriff's office, the sheriff was checking out the lock on one of his three jail cells.

"Need help with that, Sheriff?" asked Jess.

"Well, Jess, 'bout time you came to visit me. Naw, I'll get the blacksmith down here to fix it. Damn thing won't stay locked and I sure can't have that. What can I do for you Jess?"

"Just checking one last time to see if you have heard anything new about the three men who killed my family."

"Actually, you're in luck. I just got some information on one of them. Remember the one with the missing boot heel?"

"I remember every one of them, Sheriff."

"Well, Sheriff Manley, up in Tarkenton, about two hundred miles northwest of here, says someone fitting his description got into a shootout with the local hothead there and got himself wounded. He killed the other guy but needed surgery to remove a bullet from his left thigh. He's been recuperating in the town's local cathouse for the last couple of weeks. I've got no lead on either of the other two, but at least it's a start."

"Why doesn't the sheriff arrest him and lock him up?" Sheriff Diggs let out a sigh as he sat down behind his desk.

"Jess, you need to understand that most lawmen are not toughs. They can't handle a gun and quite frankly, most of the lawmen in small towns just do it for the money so they don't starve. They can't handle or won't handle most hardened criminals."

"Then they need to get new law," Jess retorted, not understanding this philosophy.

"No one else will take the jobs in those small backwards towns. I ain't saying it's right, I'm only telling you how it really is, okay?" Jess just shook his head, not wanting to understand how things really were. He wanted to believe that there was some justice somewhere, sometime, for someone. "Anyway," the sheriff continued, "he's the one called Randy Hastings. The only murders he's known to have committed is your family, although I have to believe he's guilty of more. Says here that there is a five hundred dollar bounty on his head, dead or alive. I thought about heading up there and seeing if I can bring him in."

"No, don't bother, Sheriff. Leave him to me."

The sheriff took on a fatherly tone. "Jess, don't talk that way. Hell, Jess, I know what you've been planning. I've watched you come into town and buy every round of ammo Jim Smythe has ordered over the last two years. I know about your practice with your pa's gun and I know what's in that skull of yours. But it just ain't a good idea to go off and hunt men down and kill 'em. It changes a man, it makes him a cold-blooded killer and he can never come back from that. Once you start, you can't stop and then you end up dead before it's over. Trust me, I've seen it over and over again and I don't want to see it happen to you, Jess."

"Sheriff, I understand what you're trying to do, and I appreciate it, I really do. But you have to understand something. I started the day I sat on the porch of my pa's house crying rivers out of my eyes after finding my entire family murdered. That's the day I changed, not today. I lost my childhood and quite frankly, my life that day. Not a day goes by that I don't wish they had killed me along with my family, 'cause I died that day too. You know what it is like to walk through life already dead? The way I see it, I have nothing to live for except one thing. I have only one thought left in life. To hunt those bastards down and make them pay. I'll kill every one of them along with anyone else who gets in my way. Look in these eyes, Sheriff. What do you see? What have you seen for the last two years?" Jess walked closer to the sheriff. "Tell me what you see, Sheriff?"

The sheriff looked into Jess's eyes, which were black and cold, devoid of anything but death and vengeance. It was the same look he saw in Jess for the last two years. He saw torment...and death. Jess was right and he was speaking the truth and the sheriff had already known that.

"Okay, here is everything I have on this piece of shit. As soon as I get anything on the other two, I will get it to you. You just promise me to be careful. These men are cold-blooded killers."

“Thanks, Sheriff,” said Jess, as he took the copy of the wanted poster. “You can be sure of one thing. Their killing days are coming to a close.” Jess said it with such a meaning in his voice that the sheriff truly believed it.

Jess headed over to the bank to see Mr. Jameson. He wanted to go over the account before he left town. He had sold everything that he figured that he wouldn’t need and he now had over nine hundred dollars in the bank.

As always, Mr. Jameson was working at his desk. He was always glad to see Jess because he was usually bringing money to deposit, but not today.

“Howdy, Jess. Making a deposit again?”

“Not today. Actually I need to take some money out.”

“Well, how much do you need, Jess?”

“I’d like two hundred dollars.”

“Okay, Jess.” Mr. Jameson filled out a slip for him to take to the teller but Jess didn’t get up right away. “Anything else I can do for you today, Jess?”

“I was wondering how I can get money when I’m on the trail?”

Jameson explained about how he could wire for money if he needed any while away from town. Then Jess went to the general store and visited with Jim and Sara. He explained that he would be leaving town and he paid up his bill and purchased all the .45 rounds Jim had, as well as rounds for the rifle and more shotgun shells. He told Jim and Sara that he would stop next week and see them one more time before he left and then he headed out of town.

Jim and Sara were standing on the front porch of the store watching Jess ride out. Sara looked up at Jim with tears in her eyes.

“Do you think we should tell him?”

“I don’t know, Sara, I got to think about it. We can decide before he leaves next week.”

“He deserves to know, Jim. We should tell him before he finds out for himself.”

“We’ll see, Sara, we’ll see.”

Jess went back to the ranch and spent his last week there. During that week, he practiced more than ever. He had become blazingly fast. Faster than anyone would believe a man could be. It was almost unnatural. The gun and holster made all the difference. He spent several evenings walking around the ranch wondering what it would be like if these killers hadn’t changed his life forever. He imagined Samantha still aggravating him and his pa working around the stables and helping him draw his old wooden pistol. He had nailed his old wooden pistol to his pa’s cross at his gravesite as if to say thanks. He imagined his ma cooking, and watching her work around the house at night cleaning up after all of them. He had had a great family and a great life to look forward to. And the three men that he would hunt down had taken all of that away from him in one instant. He wondered how many other people had to go through what he was going through. How many innocent people are murdered every day, and how many survivors are left to live the aftermath. And what do the people who commit these murders feel? Do they feel any guilt? Do they consider how they have affected people’s lives? Do they ever think about what they have done? And what about the law? Why can’t they stop it or at least try harder? Who really stands for justice in this world and who dispenses it? If no one else was ready to dispense justice, he was ready to step up to the task. He would dispense it from the end of a gun and holster that no one had ever seen before.

That last week at the ranch was a week full of memories. He spent a lot of time sitting at the gravesites remembering all the good times. Jess knew that someday he would come back, but not for a while. He knew that he was in for a long journey. On the last day, he made his last breakfast in the cabin, saddled up and headed for town to say his last goodbyes. Before he climbed in the saddle he strapped his new gun on, put his pa’s rifle in the scabbard and put the shotgun into the special back holster he had made from his pa’s scraps of leather. He stuck his pa’s Colt .45 Peacemaker in the front of his holster belt. He checked his knife and it was sharp and in its place strapped to the back of his gun belt. He was ready. Hell, he was ready for anything or anybody. Yet, he had something more. Something most men didn’t have. He had rage—and he had reason.

He had another advantage that most men don’t have. He truly was not afraid of dying. He had absolutely no fear of death. He felt as if he had already died with his family. A man with absolutely no fear of death was the most dangerous animal in the world. Fear would make the toughest man hesitate. Fear would slow the fastest man. Fear would affect the skill and accuracy of the best gunslingers. A man with no fear had none of these disadvantages. And, he had the new pistol and holster. A pistol and holster that no

one had ever seen before—and wouldn't see again for a hundred years. Jess looked over the ranch once more before he started down the ranch road towards the main road.

Something happened when he rode down the ranch road. Something you couldn't quite put a finger on. His life changed again at that moment. He crossed an imaginary line before he reached the main road. He knew that he was on to another part of his life and that he would never return to the old one, but more than that. Something happened to him inside. There was a change in him deep inside. He was more like a machine that had been sent on a mission. There was no feeling inside him one way or another. There was nothing he was afraid of and nothing that could stand in his way. God help the men he hunted or anyone who got in his way. They were destined for death, and he was destined to do the killing. It felt right.