

Chapter Seven

On his way into Black Creek, Jess stopped along the way at his old favorite stop by the big boulder at the bend in the creek. Not for himself though, just for his horse to drink. While Gray drank, Jess remembered the confrontation with the three men on that fateful day. He could picture them as plain as if it was only yesterday. He could even picture where he had been stopped with the wagon with the three men facing him. The rage began to swell up, but he beat it down. Gray finished his drink and Jess had a nice ride in to town, but as soon as he turned the bend toward the main street of town he noticed more activity than usual. There were people out gathering and talking together. He noticed one man who ran across the street to the saloon. He put himself on high alert. He already planned that whenever he rode in to any town that he would pay close attention to everything going on. He calculated it might mean the difference between life and death to a man who was hunting other men. But he was not hunting anyone here. He pulled up in the front of Jim and Sara's general store. He dismounted and as he was tying up Gray, Jim walked out of the store.

"Jess, I have some bad news for you..." he stopped in mid-sentence... "What the hell is this?" he said, surprised to see Jess with a gun and holster strapped to his waist, another pistol tucked in the front of the holster, and a

shotgun handle sticking up behind his back. Jim stared at him for a few seconds before he spoke again.

“Jess—are you okay?”

“Yes, sir. I’m just fine.”

Jim was looking Jess over and he finally got a good look at the gun strapped on Jess’s waist. It was like no other rig he’d ever seen. Everything about the gun and holster seemed different. “Jess, where the hell did you get that outfit? What kind of gun is that?” Jim asked.

“Well, I found it in the bottom of my pa’s lock box,” replied Jess not wanting to explain about the gun.

“That don’t look like any gun I’ve ever seen before, and I ain’t never seen a holster quite like that before either.”

“Jim, you said you had some bad news? What news?” Jess asked, trying to break Jim’s stare. Jim hesitated, still not sure what to make of Jess.

“Oh, yes. Well, Jess, the sheriff was shot dead not more than a half-hour ago.”

If Jess was surprised, he didn’t show it, but Jim could see a coldness coming forth in Jess’s eyes. He had noticed the coldness growing in Jess over the last two years, but this look that he saw in this young man who was just a boy not all that long ago was not something he ever wanted to see, especially in Jess.

“Who did it?” Jess asked Jim. There was no emotion to the question at all. He didn’t really care what the answer was or who had done it.

“That no good son of a bitch Red Carter. He came in here all hot and drunk and the sheriff had to go over in the saloon because he was trying to pick a fight with some drifter. The sheriff warned him that he was going to put him in jail again. Red told the sheriff that he wasn’t going to let him crack him on the head with that shotgun again and you know that’s exactly what would’ve happened. When the sheriff gave him his last warning, Red just

skinned leather and shot him. Just like that. Then he went back to drinking at the bar again. That cold-blooded bastard is still over there. He sure has got some nerve.”

“And the drifter?” asked Jess.

“Folks say he high-tailed it out of there before the shootout. Sara went over to Doc Johnson’s place to see if she could help, but the sheriff was dead before they got him there. Shot right through the heart. I swear, it seems like it’s always the good ones who go down.”

“Not today,” said Jess as he turned and headed for the Doc’s to see for himself. As he walked away, without turning, he said, “Jim, let me know if Red tries to leave town while I go over to the Doc’s.”

“Well—okay I guess so,” Jim replied a little worried about what Jess was thinking about.

Jess walked down to the Doc’s place. Doc Johnson was a fair doctor, but not a great one. When Jess walked in, he saw the sheriff lying still on the table. There was blood all over him and his shirt was torn open. The Doc was standing over him with a grim look on his face and Sara was sitting in a chair in the corner of the small room with her head in her hands sobbing. Doc Johnson looked up at Jess and grimaced when he said, “He never had a chance. Nothing I could do for him, Jess.” Jess nodded to the Doc, saying nothing. The Doc pulled a sheet up over the sheriff. Sara had slowed with her sobbing only because she noticed that Jess had come in. She looked up at Jess with tears streaming from her red eyes, but before she could say anything she noticed what Jess was wearing. She was speechless for a moment and she just kept looking back and forth between him and the gun strapped around his waist.

“Jess, what...why are you wearing that,” she said as she nodded to the gun, “and where did you get such a thing?”

“That doesn’t matter. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m not hurt, if that’s what you mean.”

“You stay in here, okay?”

“Okay...but why? The Doc doesn’t need my help now.”

“Just do as I say...please.” Jess insisted. She nodded and started sobbing again. Doc Johnson said nothing else, he kept staring at Jess, startled at this extreme change in this young man that, up until now, he had always thought of as a young kid.

Jess walked out and headed across the street straight for Andy’s Saloon. He wasn’t really thinking about what he was going to do. He had nothing planned except that he was going to deal with Red Carter. Exactly what that meant, he wasn’t really sure and yet, then again, maybe he did. He just knew that he had to deal with him. This town had been good to him and his family. They were there when he needed them and they were terrified of Red Carter. They would be even more terrified now, since there was no law in town and no one was going to step up to replace the sheriff now after what Red had done. He stopped in the middle of the street. He looked up and down the main road of town. He glanced over to the general store and saw Jim standing just outside the door, watching. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Sara looking out of the window of the Doc’s office. He looked down to the sheriff’s office. The rage began to build again. It hardened his heart. He looked back to the saloon. He realized that once he walked in there, and he was determined to do so at any cost, he would cross another imaginary line. It was an imaginary line that he knew he could never cross back over again. That was the way life really was and he was learning faster than most. Yet he knew in his heart that the decision to cross that line was made back on that horrible day two years ago. The day that Jess Williams would never forget. He was ready.

He walked through the saloon door, which was wide open. As soon as he stepped inside the doorway, he stopped to survey the scene. There were four men at a poker table. They weren't really playing cards anymore. They were just going through the motions, terrified that Red Carter would start in on them. The bartender was standing behind the bar cleaning up just so he'd have something to do. One of the girls from Dixie's place was sitting at a table crying. She looked as though she had been slapped around. There was a little blood on her forehead and her hair was all out of place. Jess assumed that Red was responsible for that, too. He noticed all of this in a little more than a second. Red Carter was standing at the bar with a bottle of whiskey and a shot glass. He looked up at Jess.

"Why, little Jess Williams," Red said sarcastically, "What the hell are you doing in a saloon? And what the hell is all that? You wearing a gun now?" Jess did not reply.

"What the hell you got behind you. Is that a shotgun? Are you going rabbit hunting or something? Speak up, boy, I'm talking to you!" Red exclaimed.

Jess looked him straight in the eyes and with no discernable emotion said, "You shouldn't have killed the sheriff, Red. He was my friend and he was a good man. He didn't deserve to be shot down like that."

"The hell he didn't," retorted Red. "He was gonna crack me on the head with that goddamn shotgun again. I warned him about what would happen if he ever tried that again. You know. You were there that day in the jail when I told him to never touch me again."

"You still had no right to do what you did," Jess said.

"What the hell is it to you, boy? You gonna do something about it?" Red yelled.

“Oh,” Red continued, “you ain’t going rabbit hunting are you. You mean to tell me that you came in here to face me for killing a two-bit sheriff? You gotta be kidding me, boy. You ain’t got the gonads to face me or any other man for that matter.”

The bartender, William, who hadn’t said anything up to now, got up enough courage to speak.

“Jess, do us all a favor and go on home. We’ve had enough killing here today. Red, you leave the boy alone.”

“You shut your mouth, barkeep, or there will be some more killing real soon, starting with you!” Red yelled.

The bartender went back to minding his own business. He was terrified and Jess could see it in his eyes and that made him even madder. *So this is what it always comes down to*, he thought to himself. A world of terror where a man who was fast with a gun and a will to use it could terrorize innocent people and there was no justice to prevail. A world where men could slaughter an innocent family and get away with it. *Well, justice has arrived*, Jess thought to himself.

Jess moved over to the left of the saloon. He knew that Sara was still looking out of the window across the street, and he didn’t want to chance a stray bullet hitting her. He moved towards a corner where no one could get behind him. He never took his eyes off Red. By this time Red realized that Jess was serious about this. He moved himself away from the bar a little and straightened up his stance and dropped his hand a little toward the butt of his revolver.

“Boy, why don’t you go home now before you get hurt? I ain’t never shot a boy, but if you plan on pulling for that gun, I’ll kill you for sure. Don’t you ever doubt it,” said Red.

“You won’t be shooting any boy today or any other day. Quite frankly, the last man you’ll ever kill is

lying over in Doc's office across the street. He was a good man and didn't deserve to die. And he was my friend," replied Jess. The cheeks on Red's face quivered. His ears turned a cherry red and he was about all out of what little patience he had.

"Why you cocky little bastard! You think you can come in here and threaten me. I ain't scared of no man, much less a wet-behind-the-ears little shit-head punk like you. You've got about five seconds to clear out of here before you go too far!" Red hollered.

"Then I guess you got about five seconds to live. What are you planning to do with them?" Jess replied, his eyes as cold as ice.

"I guess I'll kill me a punk-ass kid."

Red moved his hand a little closer to his gun. Jess had already placed his hand in position without Red even knowing it. Jess could see it in Red's eyes that he was going to draw. Jess never moved. He waited until Red went for the gun and Jess still never moved. Red finally got his hand on the butt of his pistol and pulled. Red's gun barrel just cleared the top of his holster and then the gun fell backwards. Red's hand was no longer holding it. Instead, his hand was clutching his chest where a bullet had just torn through his heart exploding it instantly. Red slumped to his knees. He looked at Jess with a look of surprise and amazement. An instant later he was lying face down in a pool of blood not more than ten feet from the drying pool of blood that had been left from Sheriff Diggs's body. Jess watched Red's death with no emotion. He thought maybe he should feel some remorse, but when he searched his heart, he couldn't find any. After Red fell to the floor, Jess put his gun back in the holster in one quick smooth movement.

"Jesus Christ!" exclaimed the bartender. "I ain't never seen anyone draw like that before. If I hadn't seen it for myself, I would have thought you drew on him before

he had a chance. Jess, you're lucky you got a witness or else they'd say it wasn't a fair fight."

Jess said nothing. He just looked at Red Carter lying face down on the floor, dark red blood running out from under him and pooling in a low spot on the plank floor. Jess walked over to Red's body and using his left foot rolled him over. He unbelted his holster and reached down and picked up Red's gun and stuck it back in the holster. He checked Red's pockets and found about fifty dollars and he placed ten dollars of it on the bar.

"This should help pay for any damages."

"I don't know if you should be taking his stuff, Jess. It don't seem right," the bartender said.

"He won't need it anymore," replied Jess. "Besides, as far as I see it, I've earned it. Is that his horse out there?" The bartender nodded affirmatively.

"I'll be taking that, too."

"Don't matter to me. I mind my own business, Jess."

"I'll be selling the horse and saddle. If you need any more money to clean up or fix any damages, you see Mr. Jameson at the bank and he'll give you the money, okay?"

"Sure thing, but this is more than enough." Jess walked out of the saloon and Sara was standing in the middle of the street with her mouth covered with her hands.

"Oh my Lord, Jess, what have you done?" she said.

"The right thing, Sara. That's what I've done," answered Jess. "I've got some business to take care of and I'll stop by and see you and Jim before I leave, okay?"

Sara nodded and headed down the street toward the general store. Jess walked the horse over to the stables and sold the horse and the saddle. He sold the rifle he found on Red's horse to the gunsmith and he took the money to Jameson and deposited it. He kept Red's .45. It was always

good to have extra weapons handy. Then he headed to Jim and Sara's. He walked into the store and found Jim behind the counter and Sara sitting in a chair at the end of the counter by the small wood stove Jim used to heat up the front of the store. They both looked up at Jess when he walked in as if they didn't know him anymore.

"Jess," said Jim, "I know what you're planning to do and it's no life for a young man. Is there any way we can talk you out of this?"

Jess looked Jim straight in the eyes and gave a simple one-word answer.

"No."

Sara wiped more tears from her eyes.

"Jess, you just killed a man back at the saloon and you don't seem the slightest bit bothered by it. I swear you are not the same boy I knew before."

"I'm not a boy anymore and I'm surely not the same person you knew before," replied Jess softly. "I guess having your pa killed in cold blood and having your ma raped and then slashed to death with a knife, not to mention your little sister raped and shot in the head, has a way of changing a boy into a man. A man who has seen no justice because those three bastards are still out there and still probably doing the same thing to other innocent people. Well, justice is coming and I'm it. I'm going to find those three bastards and kill them. They're not going to see any judge or jury or the inside of any jail cell. They're going to die at the end of a gun barrel and you can be sure that *my* hand will be holding it. Red Carter needed killing and I won't apologize for it to anyone. I'm sorry if that disturbs you both, but that is just the way it's going to be from here on in. I only hope that you won't hate me for it."

"We could never hate you, Jess," said Sara. "We will always consider you family. We just don't want to see

you turn to this way of life. Using a gun is not a good way to live...it's a good way to die."

"I don't plan on dying, but I'm not afraid of it either," Jess said, all too confident.

"Jess, where did you get that gun?" asked Jim. He'd been looking it over while Jess was talking to Sara.

Jess let his palm touch the butt of the pistol. "Let's just say it came to me."

"It's just that I've never seen any gun like that before. And the holster, it sure is different from any holster I ever saw. Was it your pa's? He never mentioned any gun he had like that."

"Where the gun came from isn't important. It's my gun. That's all you need to know. I have to be leaving now. The sheriff told me the other day that he had a lead on one of the killers of my family. He said that Randy Hastings had been involved in a shooting up in Tarkenton about two hundred miles northwest of here. I intend to follow that lead and hunt that bastard down and kill him."

"Like Red Carter?" asked Sara, still wiping tears from her eyes.

"Yes, only worse. I plan on letting that son of a bitch die a little bit slower."

"Oh Jess," Sara said in almost a whisper. Jim looked at Sara and he knew what she was thinking. She figured that it was time to tell him something that she would never tell him if any of his family was still alive. But there was no reason to hold back the truth any longer.

"Jess, there is something that we need to tell you. Your parents swore us to never tell you about this, but now they're gone and we think you should know," Sara said.

"Know what?" asked Jess.

"Jess, you have other family," said Jim.

Jess turned to look at Jim with a look of disbelief.

"What the hell are you talking about? I don't have any other family. My family was murdered."

Jim hung his head. Then he began to speak in a quiet, deliberate tone.

“Jess, John Williams was a good man and a better friend, but he wasn’t your real pa...”

“That’s not true!” Jess cut in.

Jim cleared his throat and gathered his emotion so that he could continue.

“Jess, your real father was a man by the name of Ed Sloan. He’s a gunslinger and a gambler who was taken with your ma the minute he saw her. I tried to tell her that he was no good for her, but she wouldn’t listen. Don’t blame your ma, Jess. She was young and single and he was as slick as they come. She spent some time with him and she ended up pregnant with you...and your brother, Tim.” Jess sat down in the other chair in the front of the store, too stunned by this revelation about another part of his family that he had never known about. Jim continued, “after your ma had the two of you, your real father took off with your twin brother and a gal from Dixie’s that he’d gotten close to while your ma was with child. Her name was Sally. He was a no good son of a bitch and he hurt your ma. Last we heard about your brother he’d taken up the gun and hear tell he’s mighty fast with one. Your father, Ed, is even faster. The two of them are no good and you should think twice before you have anything to do with them if you have any sense, Jess. Anyway, we figured you had a right to know.”

Jess couldn’t believe what he was hearing. *A twin brother? How could this be? Was he a bad man? And, what about his father?* The thought of all this just balled his nerves up in a knot that found its way to his throat. He swallowed hard trying to push the knot down. All of these thoughts whirled around in his head like a little dust devil. Then, he made a decision. He couldn’t let all this distract him now. He had a job to do. He would have to deal with it

later. He stood up from his chair and looked at Jim and Sara with bewilderment.

“Do you know where they are now?”

“Last we heard they were both in Wichita. That was quite a while ago. They could be almost anywhere by now.”

“Thanks for telling me. I would never have known, but I still have to go. I’ll have to deal with this later.”

“No you don’t,” said Sara almost desperately, “you can stay here and maybe we can contact your real father. Maybe they aren’t so bad now. Maybe having some family might change the path that you’re on right now. I don’t want to see you do this, Jess. Please.”

Jess thought for a moment. He looked back from Sara to Jim and back to Sara again. His mind was made up and there was nothing in this world that could change that. Sara and Jim saw the look in his eyes and they both realized it. They knew that it was hopeless. They both knew that he was going to be a killer of men and that he would live or die by the gun. Sara stood up and walked to Jess and gave him a long hug. Jess turned to Jim and extended his hand and shook Jim’s hand.

“I’m going to miss the both of you. I’ll keep in touch and if you need anything, tell Jameson over at the bank. He’ll know where I am most of the time.”

Jess hung his head for a moment and without another word he walked down the steps and mounted his horse and headed down the main street. He never looked back. Jim and Sara were both standing on the walkway watching him ride away. They were holding hands and exchanging glances. Sara looked at Jim as Jess finally turned the corner at the end of the street and said, “do you think we’ll ever see him again?”

“I hope so, Sara, I surely hope so.”

“Me too,” she said, starting to cry again.

As Jess turned the corner at the end of the street, his thoughts turned to what Jim and Sara had just told him about his brother and father. He knew that he would eventually track them down, but not until he finished his business. He made up his mind right then and there that he would always consider John as his real pa no matter what else was true. John and Becky were the ones who raised him. They were the ones who took care of him, fed him and loved him. He loved them dearly. He would always consider his sister Samantha as his full sister, too. He would never forget them and he would make sure that justice was done right by them even if it meant losing his life in the process. Then his thoughts turned to Randy Hastings, the young man that he met on the road that day. It was strange how things happened in life. One minute you meet a man and before you know it you find out he murdered your family in cold blood. Why did life happen that way? He could have met a thousand other people on that road that day, but he didn't. He met those three. Were things set in stone right from the start? Was destiny something that just happened and there was no way to change it? These were all things that he could not explain, but only experience.

There was one thing that he was sure of. He knew that Randy Hastings was one of the three men who murdered his family. He also knew that he was going to find him, confront him and then kill him in the cruelest way that he could. And he would not regret it in any way. He would sleep like a baby after the deed was done. He would do the world a favor. He would rid it of one more piece of slime that was not needed, and make sure that Randy Hastings would never kill again. Of that, he was certain. His journey had begun. It would not be over until all three were in their graves with maggots eating at their corpses. Only then would justice be served. He rode out of the town of Black

Creek and headed for the town of Tarkenton. Destiny would meet him there...at least part of it.