

# Prologue

## YEAR 2002

“What’s the number?”

“Forty-nine hundredths of a second!”

“Not bad,” Dave said.

The two shots were so close together they sounded like one shot, but there were definitely two shots flying out of the barrel of Dave Walters’s pistol. Dave was pulling the first shot by thumbing the specially designed hammer back and the second shot was fanned by the middle finger of his left hand. The two balloon targets were about five feet apart and about fifteen feet away. He was using the customary wax bullets, which are used for competition fast draw.

“How about that one?” Dave asked Pat.

“Forty-seven hundredths of a second. It’s getting hot out here. How much longer?”

“Hell, I’m finished.”

Dave Walters had been at it for two hours trying to get his fast draw down under the forty hundredths of a second mark. That’s where he needed to be to be able to seriously compete in the world championship title for fast draw. Dave had been competing in fast draw competition for several years now and he had won some matches, but he was hell bent on being the fast draw champion of the world. Pat Johnson was his good friend and also competed in fast draw competition along with Dave. They had spent the last two hours at The Shooting Corral, which was a local gun range with a specialty. It had an area where competitors in fast draw and cowboy action shooting could ply their trade and practice.

“Hey, you did okay. Maybe after you pick up that new rig you ordered, you’ll break that four tenths of a second mark.”

“I hope so. My wife has been giving me a real ass-full about buying a new rig. She’s been wanting some new bedroom furniture.”

“Hell, tell her that when you become the new fast draw champion of the world, you’ll be able to buy her a whole house full of furniture!”

“Sure I will. You sure know how to help a guy out.”

“So, when are you getting it?” asked Pat.

“I called Bob Graham today and he said it’s ready. Want to go with me?”

“You bet! I’d love to meet Graham. I hear he’s one of the top custom gun builders in the country. Maybe I can get him to build me one.”

“Okay,” Dave said as he closed his trunk, “I’ll pick you up on Saturday.”

“I’ll be waiting and breakfast is on you this time.”

Dave picked up Pat at seven and they drove the hundred and fifty miles to Bob Graham’s house.

Graham greeted them with his usual wide grin. “Morning fellows. How was your drive?”

“Just fine,” Dave replied. “This is my friend Pat Johnson. He’s a shooter, too.”

“Well, I’ve got the gun all set and ready for you to check out.”

“Great,” Dave replied. “You did say this morning that you got the FD7 model holster from Mernickle Custom Holsters, right?”

“Just came in yesterday, it’s in the box here. It fits the gun beautifully and I think you’re going to like the way it handles. Bob Mernickle sure knows how to work leather into a functional yet beautiful piece of art.” Graham invited them both in and he had the new pistol in a plastic case. When Dave opened the case, his expression was one of a kid who had just gotten the gift he had always wanted.

The gun was beautiful. When Dave ordered the gun, he asked Graham, who is also an accomplished artist, to carve him a custom set of handgrips for the new gun. The handgrips were carved from the stag horns of the Sambar deer from India.

“You like the handgrips, Dave?” asked Graham.

“They’re beautiful. And the way the grips flare out at the bottom just makes the gun feel so much better in my hand.”

“They’re not just pretty, they’re functional. You’ll find that they help get the gun out of the holster much easier than the stock grips the gun originally came with.”

Dave looked the gun over some more. It was perfectly balanced. Graham explained how he had lathed the barrel small enough to be able to fit an aluminum shroud over the steel barrel. That made the gun lighter, perfectly balanced, easier to draw and allowed for the gun to shoot live .45 ammo as well as wax bullets, which was something else Dave had expressly wanted. Graham explained to Dave that he started with a Ruger Blackhawk .41 magnum caliber single-shot revolver and customized just about everything. There was not much original left of the gun. Besides changing out the barrel and making it a .45 caliber, he changed all the flat internal springs to coil springs, cut the trigger guard in half and changed the trigger to one that was about three times as wide as the original. He installed a special fanning type hammer that could also be thumb-cocked and the firing pin was not on the hammer. It was internal so that when you fanned the gun, you didn’t have to worry about ripping your fingers up on the firing pin. The hammer rose straight up instead of curving back, which made it much easier to fan. Graham replaced many of the gun’s original parts with aluminum to lighten it. Any part that was not changed to aluminum was nickel-plated. It truly was a work of art.

“Bob, I think he’s going to drool on the gun,” Pat said jokingly.

Bob Graham patted Dave on the shoulder. “Go ahead and put the holster on and try it out. I think you’ll like the way it just glides out of that holster.”

Dave picked up the holster and looked it over. It, too, was a work of art. *Bob Mernickle was born to work magic on leather*, Dave thought to himself. He gently slipped the gun into the holster and it fit perfectly. Dave worked the action of the gun and it was smooth. He dry-fired the gun several times, both thumbing and fanning it. It worked better than he had ever dreamed it might.

“I love it!” Dave exclaimed, as he placed his hand on Graham’s shoulder. “With this gun and this holster, I know I can get a chance at the championship title.”

“Probably, as long as I’m not competing at the same time,” said Graham. They all laughed. The men and women who competed in fast draw were fierce competitors, but also a friendly group who believed in good sportsmanship. Dave thanked Graham again and packed up his new pistol rig. Pat spoke with Graham a few minutes about building a gun for him.

Dave dropped Pat off and headed home. At home, he took the gun out of the case and looked it over once more. He read the serial number on side of the gun: 40-01079. He looked the holster over once more and took note of the serial number stamped on the back of the holster: SN020679. The name “BOB MERNICKLE CUSTOM HOLSTERS” was stamped on the back as well as the model number, FD7, and “MADE IN CANADA.” He put the gun in the holster and hung it up in his stand-up gun locker.

He was watching television when his wife came in the door. He waited for her to say something first since he didn’t know how mad she still was over the purchase of a new gun and holster.

“Well,” she said sarcastically, “you’re going to show me anyway so why don’t you just do it now and get it over with.”

Dave headed for the lock box with a boyish smile on his face. Before he got around the corner he heard her shout “and I *am* going to get that new furniture before you get any more guns, agreed?”

“Agreed!” Dave said from the bedroom. He opened the lock box with his combination and reached in to pick the holster off the hook. His hand reached for air as he let out a gasp of horror and stepped back until he reached the foot of the bed and he sat down.

The new gun and holster that he had placed in his gun locker not more than one hour ago were gone!

Dave didn’t sleep very well that night. He tossed and turned repeatedly and he had several nightmares throughout the night. He woke earlier than usual and he was sweating profusely. He got up and went into the bathroom to wash off his face with some cool water. As he did, he thought about the nightmares and while most of them were somewhat vague in his mind now, there was one that he remembered very vividly. It was one of a little girl lying in a pile of hay—with a bullet hole in the middle of her forehead.