

Mark had been a Smith & Wesson man all his life. So when Frankie busted him out of the Mexican jail – *el juzgado*, which Mark figured was the origin of the slang “hoosegow” – and tossed him a revolver and then reached in his pocket for a handful of cartridges that he handed over, Mark glanced quickly at it. A Colt, he recognized, loaded, probably a Detective Special with its short barrel and rounded, smooth grip. No matter, he was thrilled to have it, and he shoved it in his waistband as he and Frankie sprinted (well, Frankie sprinted, Mark followed along at a shambling trot, the best he could do at the moment) down the litter-strewn alley, away from the adobe jail towards another sun-baked adobe building at the end of the alley, a barn maybe, and maybe with the glint of an automobile visible through an open window. Frankie glanced back at him, over his shoulder, and Mark saw what he took for hope in his eyes – they would make it. But then Frankie turned his head back around, at the end of the alley now, and stopped short, spinning to his right, his own gun – which Mark recognized as a Smith & Wesson, a third model .44 with a 5” chromed barrel – rising up, only to fall in the dust as several shots erupted and Frankie’s knees buckled and he fell heavily to the ground, clutching at his stomach, his face contorted in pain.

*Mierde!* Mark may have screamed, or he may have just thought it really loud, for he had learned to cuss in Spanish during his time in the jail, and he found himself suddenly pressing hard against the splintery wood of a lean-to at the edge of the alley, looking for a rain barrel, anything that he could hide behind, but there was nothing. *No matter*, he thought, *these are the times that try men’s souls*, and then in the back of his mind wondered where in the hell that had come from, as he saw the barrel of a raised shotgun peek around the corner of yet another adobe at the end of the alley.

Mark was fast, even those folks who didn’t like him gave him that. He wasn’t particularly accurate, but in his revolver club back home they always said he could miss faster than anyone they had ever seen. So when the *Federale*, strangely barefoot though otherwise uniformed, spun around the corner into the alley with the shotgun leveled, Mark’s hand flew to his waistband, grasped the butt of the Colt, and in one blur of motion, the gun was up and firing. Dust flew off the chipped adobe wall next to the *Federale*, and a saguaro cactus in front of the barn made a wet plopping sound as one of the round-nosed .38 Specials burst into it. More dust flew at the feet of the *Federale*, who sprinted across the alley and behind the cover of the (also adobe) wall of the building across from him.

Mark fired twice more, wondering if he had done any good and whether there were any more of the bastards around the corner, and then he pulled the trigger again, the *click!* ringing out louder than any of the shots that had preceded it. He did it again, another *click!*, and his mind then kicked in, told him *Load the gun! Load the gun!* and he knelt, his right thumb instinctively slamming forward on the cylinder latch and the fingers of his left hand curling under the revolver to shove the cylinder out of the frame, and then he did it again and *again and again and damn it again* because nothing was happening, and in his peripheral vision he saw the *Federale*, grinning now, following the barrel of his shotgun around the corner of the adobe, pulling the hammer back – it was a Winchester 1897, Mark registered – and Mark, only feet away from Frankie, lying there in the dust now, tried desperately to figure how he could get to Frankie’s revolver in time to miss the spreading charge of buckshot that would surely be headed towards him. He glanced desperately down at his hands now, the thumb trying to shove the cylinder latch forward, suddenly dawning on him – something he had heard about but never paid any attention to – *you push on a Smith & Wesson, you pull on a Colt* – and he yanked his thumb back on the cylinder latch and the gun flew open and then Mark’s right hand was fumbling in his pocket for the cartridges even as his left hand worked the ejector rod to clear the gun of empties. Two cartridges in a shaking hand, poking them into the chambers, noticing – the damnedest thing – the verdigris staining the brass of the cartridges, not seeing the orange cloud erupt from the barrel of the shotgun but feeling a heck of a thump as his upper abdomen took the load of buckshot and his diaphragm shredded, and then the cylinder was slamming back home and his arm was coming up, raising the Colt to eye level but then the revolver continued on in an arc towards the dust of the alley, Mark’s body following behind it, his head thumping onto the dirt and a shard of glass cutting his cheek, his eyes focusing then on the chromed Smith & Wesson feet away that might as well have been back in Texas

for all the good it was doing him, and Mark thinking *Why didn't you at least give me the Smith, Frankie?* and then another explosion from above him and then, nothing else.

