The soft glow on the eastern horizon presaged the approach of the morning sun. It caught the attention of an old rooster on his perch near a henhouse. He puffed up his breast and crowed his welcome to the coming dawn.

Inside the nearby farmhouse, Sammy Conner was jolted out of his fitful sleep. He had a restless night and had just managed to get to sleep when he was awakened by a live alarm clock. Sammy had an appointment in town that he had to keep. It involved a lousy situation with Tom Davenport, their neighbor. He owned the biggest ranch in the territory, and he wanted to add their property to it.

John Conner had homesteaded 160 acres of prime bottomland that included a year-round creek that never went dry. The Rocky Mountains were always topped with snow and provided much of that water. Davenport wanted the grass and water to expand his cattle herd.

Tom Davenport ran the town and owned the local sheriff. His son and namesake, Tom Davenport, Junior, had been causing trouble for the Conner family. The mercantile refused them credit and had even sold them corn seed that did not germinate. Of course, Davenport's bank was more than willing to give them a mortgage at a high-interest rate.

Anyone who did do business with the Conners suffered for it, even old Doc Brown. He came to the farm on an emergency call one night and was attacked on his way back to town. The sheriff never found his attacker. Sammy was confident the Davenports were the source of their troubles.

Sammy's father had died almost a full year ago. He had fallen into their creek and hit his head on a rock. Unconscious and face-down, he had drowned in just a few inches of water. Sammy always believed the Davenports were involved, but he could never prove anything.

There were tracks by the creek where his father died, but the sheriff's posse had ridden all over them. Somehow, they had gotten there before Sammy and obscured any message held in the mud along the creek. The sheriff said in his report that Conner's horse was spooked and threw him into the stream.

All these thoughts were swirling around inside Sammy's head as he sat on the side of his bed. Sighing, Sammy stood and walked over to his window, where he looked out into the farmyard. The cool air of the night was quickly dissipating as the rising sun promptly heated every surface it touched. He could feel the fatigue leaving his body as the fresh air cleared his head and rejuvenated his muscles.

Sammy pulled on a pair of trousers and slid the suspenders over his shoulders while walking back to his bedside. The trousers had gotten smaller during the last year, or he has filled out since his dad died. Sammy must have gained a good twenty pounds of muscle while growing another two inches. He could hardly button his shirt, and even his shoes had gotten tighter.

Sammy had turned eighteen this past year and looked older than his actual age. His movements were smooth and confident. He had grown into manhood emotionally as well as physically. Perhaps the most significant change in Sammy was evident in the gunbelt that he placed upon the ground outside his bedroom window.
As he walked from his room into the farmhouse's kitchen area, he noticed the aroma of left-over rabbit stew as it warmed on the old wood stove. It would make a good breakfast for what was going to be a busy day. He had cleaned the three rabbits himself. He hoped his ma did not notice that one was shot and not trapped.

People would have called it a lucky shot, but it was not the first rabbit he had killed with a clean headshot. His practice with his pa's old Colt Single-action pistol had paid off. A week ago, he held the trigger while fanning the hammer for six shots at six cans. He hit four of them at fifty feet. He felt confident either fanning shots or squeezing off single shots at any target. Of course, a mark that shot back would be an unknown factor.

Sammy had also been practicing a fast draw and had adapted his pistol's holster to help. He had removed some of the leather from the top of it. He had also filed the front gunsight down to a nub. Sammy wanted to remove any chance of the pistol catching on something when it was quickly pulled out of the holster. A rawhide strip to tie the bottom of the holster against his leg was the final piece of a lethal arrangement.

As Sammy sat down at the table, he thought about how he would finally get some justice for his father's death. At the same time, he would get rid of the cloud hanging over their farm.

As his mother placed a bowl of stew in front of him, he said, "Mornin’, ma."

Wiping her hands on her apron, his mother said, "I warmed the left-over stew and made some fresh biscuits for you, Sammy."

As he wolfed down the stew, Sammy said, between mouthfuls, "I have to run into town today. I need to speak to Kinsey at the mercantile about the bad seed he sold us."

"Sammy, don’t take your pa’s gun with you. I know what you’ve been doing with it. Nothing good can come from what you are planning."

"If’n I don’t do somethin’, ma, we’ll lose everything. Besides, they have to pay for killing pa."

Wiping some stew from his chin, Sammy stood and started toward the door.

"Please, Sammy, don’t go into town today. It doesn’t feel right."

"Sorry, ma,” he said, walking out the door.

Since there was no point in sneaking around, Sammy quickly went around to the rear of the house and got his gun belt. He strapped it onto his waist and was tying it down when he heard horses ride up to the house.

As he walked back toward the front of the house, he saw three of Davenport’s riders. They were sitting on their horses while talking to his ma. She was holding an old shotgun, pointed in their general direction.

He stepped out into the open. One of the riders spotted him and reached for his gun. His ma swung the shotgun in that man’s direction and was shot by a fourth man hiding in some brush about fifty yards from the house.

Sammy froze, and time seemed to stop as his ma fell backward into the house. He was galvanized into action when a bullet from the rider who drew his gun nicked his ear.

Before the man could fire a second shot, Sammy drew his pistol and fanned four shots at the riders, who were trying to settle their bucking horses. Two of the men fell out of their saddles with bullet wounds. One was dead as he hit the ground, while the other was doubled-up and holding a belly wound.
The third man had been masked by the other two riders and was riding away from the house. Sammy killed him with an aimed shot. Then Sammy dropped to the ground as a rifle bullet passed through the spot where he had been standing. The fourth man was firing what sounded like a Winchester from behind some brush.

Sammy rolled onto his back and reloaded his Colt. He was in a slight depression and low enough that the hidden shooter did not have a clear shot from ground level. He would have to stand and expose himself or shift his position to have any chance of hitting Sammy.

Once he finished reloading, Sammy decided to take a chance and show himself to the hidden shooter. He had practiced shooting at an old bucket at fifty yards and could hit it three times out of five. The man would be a lot bigger than a bucket. He just had to get him to reveal himself.

Sammy suddenly stood and fanned three shots into the brush where he knew the man was hiding. A return shot whizzed past, nearly hitting his head. Spinning around as if he had been hit, Sammy fell to the ground and lay still.

He knew the shooter would have to stand to see him lying on the ground. He had positioned himself, so he lay on his back with his pistol held next to his side.

He saw a head appear above the brush, followed by a man’s chest and shoulders. A rifle came into view as the man appeared to be taking aim at Sammy’s prone body. He never got off a shot. Sammy’s first bullet hit him in the neck and his second one got him in the chest as he was falling backward. Sammy had never practiced shooting from any sort of a prone position. Still, the gun felt like an extension of his arm, and his aim was almost automatic.

Two hours later, Sammy was riding away from his empty house. He had buried his mother next to his father and said some words over her. Sammy was not a church-goer, but they had a family Bible, and he was able to read a few passages from it. As he rode away, it was in his saddlebags along with a few other possessions. After he took care of business, he would sell the farm and travel to the west.

The riders from Davenport lay in a wadi west of the house. He had hauled them there on their own horses. The coyotes and buzzards would clean them up. Before dumping their bodies, he had gone through their gear. He added two pistols, a Winchester, and several handfuls of cartridges to his stash. He kept the horse of the man he had shot in the belly. Before he died, he had signed a bill-of-sale for the animal. He would have done anything to get rid of the intense pain of a belly wound.

He had unsaddled the other horses and chased them away from the wadi. He figured they would eventually find their way back to the Davenport ranch and keep the hands busy while he took care of things in town. It would take them some time before they found the bodies, and they would never believe a farmer’s kid could have shot them all.

Sammy was subject to a wide range of feelings as he rode toward the town. The murder of his ma had sent his mind to a dark place. It was bad enough that his pa had been killed, and he wanted justice for that. The death of his ma had pushed him past the thought of justice. Now he wanted revenge, regardless of the consequences. He had to suppress his anger before it drove him into a rash behavior that got him killed before accomplishing his goal.

The two new Colts felt reassuring tucked into his pants and covered by his shirt. They were backup weapons and did not have to be ready for a quick draw.
He had made a sling for the Winchester from a leather belt and carried it over his left shoulder. It would not get in the way of his draw and would provide additional firepower. Besides, its yellow brass receiver made it too pretty to cover with a scabbard.

Sammy’s first stop was at the mercantile store at the edge of town. Matt Kinsey, the owner, was behind the counter and gave Sammy a hard stare when he entered the store. He started to ask Sammy if he was there to pay his bill since his credit was no good but stopped in the middle of the sentence.

He had to stop when Sammy reached across the counter and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. He jerked and pulled Kinsey over the counter like he was a sack of potatoes. He threw him into a rack of shovels and watched him fall to the floor.

“You won’t get away with this!” Kinsey shouted up at him. “I’m goin’ to call the sheriff.”

Sammy did not answer. He took one of the shovels and examined the edge of the blade. When Kinsey started to push himself up off the floor, sputtering and yelling the whole time, Sammy just watched.

When both of his hands were spread open on the floor, Sammy neatly chopped three of his fingers off his left hand. He used the blade of the shovel.

Kinsey’s eyes got wide, and he opened his mouth to scream when Sammy slapped his face with the flat blade of the shovel and knocked him onto his back. Then he held the blade in front of Kinsey’s face and calmly said, “This shovel has a nice, sharp edge to it. I wonder what it would do to your nose?”

Kinsey cradled his injured hand as he sat on the floor. “What do you want?” he blurted out between his sobs of pain.

“Tell me about the corn seed you sold us. Then, tell me what happened when you was with the posse that came out and found my pa’s body last year. Keep in mind that I heard some gossip around town at different times this past year.”

“John Davenport knew I had a bad batch of seed in a shed behind the store. He made me sell it to you. We both figured you would just blame yourself when it didn’t come up. Then when your crop never came in, you would have to use credit and get so deep into debt that he could get your place cheap.”

“What about my pa?”

“The sheriff knew right where to go to find your pa’s body. When we rode up to the spot, he made us ride up and down both banks. We even had to ride into the brush along the shore where he laid. I suspected something was wrong, but I had no proof. I would have come to you if I had thought anything was really wrong.”

“I’m gonna go talk to the sheriff next. I figure I’ll be done one way or the other in about an hour. Then I’ll be comin’ back to see you. If you are still here and haven’t left town, I’ll kill you on sight.”

Sammy walked out of the mercantile and saw somebody talking to a deputy in front of the sheriff’s office. It was near the center of town and a short walk from the mercantile. He was pointing this way, and the deputy was speaking to someone in the office.

As Sammy stepped out into the street, Kinsey came out of the store behind him. His mangled left hand was dripping blood, and he held a pistol in his right hand. Sammy heard his
footsteps and listened to him cock the hammer of the gun. At the same time, he saw the sheriff come out of his office with another deputy and Davenport’s son.

Ignoring the sheriff, Sammy turned and reached for his gun. He saw he wasn’t going to make it when a loud shot rang out, and Kinsey was blown off his feet, landing in a heap in front of his store window. Blood flowed freely from a hole in his chest while the cocked pistol lay in his limp right hand.

Turning toward the source of the shot, Sammy saw a stranger walking toward him. The man rested his hand on the butt of a pistol as he walked toward Sammy. In his left hand, he carried a Sharps Rifle.

Meanwhile, the sheriff cautiously approached them from his office, accompanied by Davenport and two deputies. The four men stopped about fifty feet from Sammy and moved a short distance away from each other.

Sammy watched them while he asked the stranger, “Who are you, and why are you gettin’ involved in my business?”

Stopping beside Sammy, the stranger faced the sheriff and the other three men. He said, “Family stays together and helps each other when there is trouble. I’m your Uncle Joe. Your ma sent me a message a few months back, and it took me a while to get here. These fellas part of your trouble?”

“Yeah. They work for the biggest rancher in these parts. His son is the runt on the left.”

“How about we take care of them and then go somewhere and catch up on things around here.”

Before Sammy could reply, the sheriff shouted to them, “If you two are about done jawin’ with each other, drop your guns and come along to the jail. You’ll get a fair trial before we hang you.”

“Kinsey told me everything, sheriff. You helped kill my pa, and now I’m gonna kill you.”

Cursing under his breath, the sheriff reached for his gun. He started to pull it out of his holster as Sammy put two slugs into his chest. Sammy was surprised at how much faster he was than the sheriff. Joe asked Sammy, “What should we do with these two?”

“Let’s lock them in the jail until I settle things with Davenport. I’m sure he’ll be comin’ to town lookin’ for me before the day ends. I saw some pissant ridin’ out of town in the direction of his ranch.”

“It was his men what killed your pa, wasn’t it?”

“And my ma this morning.”
“So my little sister is dead. I got here too late.”

“Uncle Joe, I figure on grieving after I kill Davenport. We can do it together, and I’ll tell you all about her.”

Joe just kept quiet as he walked across the street to get his rifle. Then they put the deputies inside a single cell in the jail.

Slamming the door on the cell, Joe asked, “Where are the townspeople? Don’t they know they have a stake in this fight too?”

“Davenport owns most of the town, and the ones he doesn’t own are scared of him and what he could do to them. They won’t help us, but they won’t help him either, especially since he’ll come into town with five to ten riders.”

“Then I guess we better get ready.”

After a visit to the mercantile, the two men returned to the jail, where Sammy released the two deputies. He made them collect the three bodies and lay them on the boardwalk in front of the sheriff’s office. Then he told them to get out of town. They were going to fort-up inside the jail and didn’t want any prisoners getting in the way.

As soon as they left, Joe went back to the mercantile and hauled several small barrels of gunpowder and two bulky sacks into the jail. Emptying the bags onto the floor of the sheriff’s office, Joe said, “This is not a big town, and it sure emptied out in a short time.”

Sammy looked at the dynamite scattered around on the floor and said, “Anyone who didn’t skedaddle during the shooting took off right after. They’ll come back when things quiet down.”

“If’n there’s still a town here after we get done with Davenport,” Joe said, tying the sticks of dynamite into bundles.

A half-hour later, the two men admired their handiwork. If either the front or back door was opened, a shotgun blast would set off a keg of gunpowder and three bundles of dynamite setting in the center of the building.

“You certain about your escape route?” Joe asked Sammy.

Pointing at a hole in the floor, Sammy replied, “I’ll go through that hole and across the alley under the warehouse next door. Then I’ll go up through the floor into a room on the far side of the building where we stacked some wooden crates. After a second explosion, I’ll come out shooting.”

“When I set off the gunpowder and dynamite setting on the roof of the restaurant across the street, it should take care of anyone hiding there. As far as anyone else is concerned, I got a few extra sticks in my pockets,” Joe said, pointing at six sticks of dynamite sticking out of his pants. They were all fixed with fast-burning fuses. He’d use the cigar in his shirt pocket to light them off.

“How do you plan on setting off the powder on top of the restaurant?”

“I have a kerosene lamp burning on top of the barrel next to a can of kerosene. I’ll blast it with my Sharps and start a nice blaze. It’ll make the 4th of July look downright peaceful.”

“Now we just have to wait. I suspect Davenport will be here shortly, and the two deputies will get them to focus on this building,” Sammy said.
Before Joe replied, Sammy heard a large number of horses riding into town. Sammy started to say something, but Joe was already disappearing into the escape hole in the floor. He was heading for the roof of the hotel three doors down the street.

The horsemen stopped in the street at the front of the jail. There were nine of them, all facing the sheriff’s office. Davenport saw his son’s body and started to yell when Sammy broke a window with his Winchester and shot one of the men out of his saddle.

The riders scattered, most going across the street and into the restaurant and the building on either side. Two of the riders went down the road just past the warehouse. They dismounted and went into the alley between the warehouse and the hotel. They just missed Joe leaving the passage and going into the back of the hotel.

The others were maintaining a steady fire on the jailhouse, making Sammy keep his head down. The building had a brick wall on the street side, and most of the bullets were stopped. The ones that came through the windows went into the wooden back wall. The powder and dynamite were sheltered from Sammy’s sight, but it was still a dangerous situation.

Davenport saw the two men across the street as they worked their way toward the rear of the Jailhouse. He sent three others toward the front of the building. They went at an angle, staying out of everyone’s line of fire. When the firing let up for a moment, everyone could hear pounding on the back door. That was a signal. The men in the restaurant shot into the jailhouse window. The others tried to smash in the front door.

Sammy blindly fired a few shots from the window before jumping into the escape hole in the floor. He lit a backup fuse that was on the floor before leaving. That was insurance for the shotgun. If it didn’t go off when one of the doors was broken open, there would still be fireworks.

As he crawled out from beneath the building and crouched among some crates in the alley, he heard the men at the back door using sledgehammers to bust through. He quickly continued beneath the warehouse to the entrance hole in the ready room. Davenport and his men were too focused upon the jailhouse to see his movement through the alley.

He had hardly settled in when a tremendous explosion rocked the warehouse. “I guess the sledgehammers worked,” Sammy thought to himself with a chuckle.

A second explosion came right after the first one. It did not rock the warehouse like the first blast, but it did have a lot of follow-up noise.

Sammy rushed out of the warehouse to stand behind a stack of crates near the front door. His Winchester was ready for action, but it was not needed. The three buildings across the street were piles of burning kindling. The jailhouse had been replaced by a large crater, and the side of the warehouse was burning. Two men were staggering around in the street. They appeared to be in shock but still managed to raise their guns when they saw him standing there watching them.

Sammy fired two quick shots with his Winchester to bring an end to the fight. Davenport lay dead in the street, and Sammy stood over him with a blank expression on his face.

“Did you give any thought to what you’d do after you finished with Davenport?” Joe asked Sammy when he reached his side.

“Any plans I had included my ma and the farm. She’s gone now, and I suspect I’ll be a wanted man after doin’ all this damage.”
“If’n Davenport owned these buildings, there ain’t nobody to complain about it. As far as all the killin’, that was done in self-defense. Besides, there ain’t no sheriff or townsfolk around to say otherwise.”

“I thought I’d feel real happy after killing Davenport. But standing here and looking at him lying dead on the ground, I just feel empty. It don’t bring my ma or pa back. I almost wonder if’n it was worth the trouble.”

After saying what he thought, Sammy sighed and continued, “I knew I wouldn’t live on the farm anymore. There are too many bad memories to go along with the good ones. Now, since we did blow up most of the town, I don’t think Kansas will be a good place to stay.”

“You can always head west with me. It’s been a long time since I had a partner.”

“What happened to your last one?”

“Got himself scalped.”

“You think I might end up the same way if I partner with you?”

“Depends on whether or not you be a fast learner.”

“What were you doing when my ma wrote you?”

“I was scoutin’ for the army down in Arizona and New Mexico Territories. The Apaches been causin’ problems, so there’s plenty of work for a fella like me.”

“I don’t know much about scoutin’. I lived on a farm all my life.”

“You did say you wuz a fast-learner.”

“Let’s get some supplies from the mercantile. I think I’ll keep you company for a while.”