DAY OF RECKONING

 In 1864, Gideon Barnes was a twenty-eight year old corporal in the Union Army, assigned to the Army of the Tennessee (River), which was made up of recruits mostly from southwestern Ohio. Barnes had volunteered after war first broke out three years earlier, and he took his initial training at Camp Dennison, located seventeen miles from Cincinnati. Originally from Portsmouth, Ohio – a thriving town situated between the Ohio and Scioto Rivers just north of the Kentucky border – Gideon ran a dry goods store with his wife, Rebecca. “Becky” was twenty-five, and they had a son, Zebulon (“Zeb”), who was nine. Portsmouth was also a ‘station stop’ on the Underground Railroad for runaways who managed to escape from the slave state of Kentucky.

 Ohio had provided more than 320,000 troops for the defense of the Union. Only New York and Pennsylvania had sent more men. Ohio also was proud to have three of the most famous Union generals – Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, and Philip Sheridan – as native sons.

 Barnes considered himself lucky so far, having suffered just one serious wound in the terrible conflict between North and South. He had lost his left eye to a piece of exploding shrapnel during the bloody Siege of Vicksburg, shortly before the Confederate stronghold surrendered to Union forces on July 4, 1863. As a result, Gideon now wore a black eye patch. He quickly adjusted to his handicap, however, and boasted that his honed fighting abilities were in no way diminished. He had always aimed his musket with his right eye anyway, he quipped. He wrote to his wife, telling her the news of his injury, and assured Becky that losing an eye was much less serious than losing an arm or a leg, and not to worry.

 The corporal and the Army of the Tennessee were currently with General Sherman, as the burning of the Rebel supply and railway hub of Atlanta commenced. Fully three thousand buildings of the city were reduced to rubble by November 15, 1864. The following day, Sherman announced to his troops that a new strategy of ‘total war’ would be engaged. The object of this move was to ‘ultimately break the enemy’s will to resist,’ hence ending the terrible conflict as soon as possible -- thus saving lives on both sides. Specifically, the Union Army would march 300 miles to the sea – from the smoldering ruins of Atlanta to the vital Confederate port of Savannah -- confiscating or destroying everything that might be useful to the Rebels in a sixty-mile wide swath as the Union troops moved forward.

 This ‘scorched earth’ strategy was designed to split the South between Charleston and New Orleans, now that Vicksburg had lost its control of the Mississippi River. Sherman would operate deep within enemy territory, without any standard supply lines, and without any communication from Union headquarters in Washington, D.C. Instead, the general’s 62,000 troops would ‘live off the land’ by raiding rebel farms and barns for food along the way, and by confiscating stored rebel food supplies in any towns and cities. Cattle, horses, and mules were also taken on the March to the Sea. Gideon Barnes himself was one of the many “bummers,” or foragers, who fanned out in small units to ascertain anything useful for the invading Union horde. Such bummers were also under orders not to molest any enemy civilians or homes -- provided the Southerners offered no resistance. Looting or rape was strictly forbidden as well. On the March, any railroads were destroyed by tearing up the steel rails, softening the steel in huge bonfires, then twisting the malleable hot metal tracks around tree trunks into unusable knots, in what came to be dubbed “Sherman neckties.” Dams and bridges were dynamited. Cotton farms, mills, and gins were burned. Telegraph lines were cut. Any military industries or factories were destroyed. Sherman knew that 13,000 Confederate troops, most under the command of General John Bell Hood, lay some distance to the north, but Sherman himself was unconcerned. He sat ramrod straight atop his trusty horse, Duke, and calmly coordinated the long-remembered destruction which would ultimately break the back of the teetering, exhausted Confederacy.

 When Gideon and the Army of the Tennessee finally arrived with General Sherman in Savannah on December 21, the assembled city fathers there begged Sherman not to burn it to the ground as he did Atlanta. While Sherman could be severe and brutal in war, he was not a cold or merciless man; in fact, he was renowned as being fair and even lenient in times of surrender and peace. Savannah was therefore spared. Sherman then telegraphed President Lincoln and offered him the city of Savannah as a “Christmas present,” along with 25,000 bales of cotton and 150 captured cannon. Furthermore, the March had accumulated 10,000 slaves during its five weeks, and Sherman immediately declared them all free men. In a final tally, the March had seized 5,000 enemy horses, 13,000 cattle, 4,000 mules, 9.5 million pounds of corn, and 10.5 million pounds of fodder.

 When peace between North and South was finally made official on April 9, 1865 at Appomattox Court House in Virginia, Gideon Barnes (and every soldier on both sides) was ready to go home at last. He had lost many friends in the bloody, four-year carnage, and he felt lucky to have only lost an eye and not his life. Tragically, President Lincoln was assassinated just five days after the Surrender, a horror that stunned the nation. The Army of the Tennessee was later disbanded by August, and Gideon was mustered out and returned to Portsmouth, Ohio. He ached to see his wife and son again, and was anxious to resume a quieter, normal, and productive life.

 The next five years brought calm routine and prosperity for the Barnes family. Business in 1870 was vigorous at their Dry Goods store, with river traffic -- and therefore more customers from the Ohio -- steadily increasing. Becky had since delivered another healthy son, Landis, now age four, and Zeb had turned fifteen and was quickly maturing into tall but still typically skinny manhood. In fact, he recently asked to borrow his father’s straight razor and soap, to shave off some newly sprouting hairs on his chin and upper lip, which quietly amused Gideon, thinking back on his own youth. Zeb did well in school with his reading and ciphering, and he could sit a horse capably and shoot a rifle with some accuracy too.

 One humid July day, Gideon presented his wife with a rather startling new proposal – what would she think if they pulled up stakes and moved the family west to the wide open spaces of Nebraska? Becky Barnes’ dark eyebrows raised up in surprise, as she brushed a stray wisp of brown hair off her cheek and tucked it behind her ear.

 “But why, Gideon? We are happy here and doing well. We have our relatives and friends close by. The future of our town looks bright. Why leave?” Becky wondered.

 “Because, Becky darling, I figure there is a fortune to be made in the new states and territories out West. Nebraska was admitted to the Union three years ago, and the transcontinental railroad was completed last year too. Trains can now travel from New York all the way to California. The Union Pacific is selling prime farmland along its right-of-way for only $5 an acre. I know we aren’t farmers, but getting that land and holding on to it is a sure bet for riches. Land will only increase its value over time. The Federal Government is also selling lesser prime land for only $1.50 an acre, or giving it away free to any homesteaders who build and live on it for five years. Lots of immigrants coming from Europe are lately trying that last option -- not that I’m encouraging us to go to that extreme,” Gideon explained. “I’ve talked with several people over the last month about my idea, and have heard lots of good things about the town of Ogallala, Nebraska. It is right on the U.P. rail line, on the South Platte River. It’s also a cattle trail terminus for herds coming up from Texas and Dodge City, to ship their beef on the hoof back East. Before the war, it was even a stop on the Pony Express. We could sell our dry goods business here, then take our money and board the B&O train to Cincinnati, connect with the U.P. through St. Louis and Omaha, then on to Ogallala. We could buy a sizeable piece of land cheaply a few miles outside of town and build our house on a small part of it, then build a new dry goods store right near the railroad in town and start up business again. Give it a careful thought, my dear. I’d like us to decide by the end of this month if possible. It could be a bonanza, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Becky! Plus, I think a fresh start would be good for us and for the boys too, while we are all still strong and healthy,” Gideon reasoned. He was thirty-four years old at this point, and Rebecca was thirty-one. He remembered that he was 18 and she was 15 when they got married in Columbus. They had come a long way, happily together, since those younger days.

 After more discussion, even including their boys' input (both were very excited!), Rebecca Barnes finally agreed to her husband's bold plan. She had two lingering concerns, however: Would they be safe from any wild Indian attacks in Ogallala? And could they find a buyer for their dry goods store for a favorable price on such short notice? Gideon explained that nearby Fort Sidney was fully staffed by the U.S. Army, specifically to protect the U.P. railroad and its construction crews from any hostiles. They were also authorized to protect all settlers from attack. As for selling the store, Gideon had already lined up a buyer, a genial but savvy Irishman by the name of Milo O'Higgins, who had made a generous offer. That assurance and development allayed both of Becky's fears. The Barnes family was ready to move west three days later on August 4, 1870. They had enough money for 60 acres of Federal land, a modest house, and their new mercantile store.

 The long train journey was an introduction of sorts to a new America which was pulling up its eastern roots and moving west. Once past Omaha, the train was mostly filled with like-minded families like the Barnes', as well as other spellbound immigrants from Europe speaking various strange languages. The mood on board was a mixture of sharing a thrilling adventure -- with apprehension, high spirits, and serious determination thrown in -- as people shared their modest foodstuffs and drinks while outlining their carefully-made plans for the future. Excitement sped through the train cars, too, when the first buffalo herds were sighted, the huge, brown, shaggy beasts grazing placidly in the distance on the waving, ocean-like prairie grasses.

 As the train approached Ogallala station, Becky was dismayed at the lack of trees here in flat, barren western Nebraska, other than some cottonwoods down by the muddy South Platte River. Gideon assured her that enough cut lumber was regularly shipped in from Omaha to build both their new home and their new store.

 The town of about 750 souls consisted of three saloons, a blacksmith barn, a livery stable, a gunsmith, a barber (who also pulled teeth as a dentist of sorts), two hotels (each with a dining room), a grocery store selling mostly canned and preserved foodstuffs (also featuring barrels of potatoes, onions, and apples), a sheriff’s office with small jail, a Federal land sales office, an expanse of large wooden cattle pens near the far rail siding, and a Union Pacific freight office -- which doubled as a bank because it had a large steel safe -- next to the train station. Gideon noticed that there was no hardware store to be seen, so he told Becky that they should build an annex onto their dry goods mercantile and later sell all sorts of needed farming and building tools. No school or church was noticed at this time, but surely both would be built as Ogallala continued to grow, Becky surmised.

 The Barnes family went right to the land office after claiming their luggage. Wilson Pendergast, who hailed from Indiana, was the Federal land sales agent. “Well, Mr. Barnes, I can set you up with a nice sixty-acre section about three miles north of town. Of course, you’ll need to dig yourself a well, because the prime land with river access for irrigation is owned by the U.P. for more than triple our price. But seeing as you don’t intend to farm your land, I wouldn’t worry about needing all that Platte water,” Pendergast calmly explained.

 The official legal documents were signed and filed, after Gideon turned over his $90. Wilson also remarked that about 150 other settlers were living in the outlying areas surrounding Ogallala. “You’ll meet your neighbors sooner or later, for sure once your store is built in town. Good luck to you and your fine family!”

 Gideon next went to the livery and rented a team and buggy. He told the stable master that he would soon need to purchase two horses from him, and to also order a new wagon for purchase. The family rode out to their section, which had previously been staked out with markers by the Federal government. The land looked unremarkable but good. The Barnes’ would live at one of the hotels in town -- the Railway Arms -- while their lumber, hammers, nails, glass windows, and paint arrived from Omaha. Gideon and Zeb would then do much of the building work themselves, but would hire out for extra helpers to speed things up. Barnes had noticed several men in town already who appeared tired of laying rail track and would be glad for the new job. The goal was for their new home to be up, furnished, and occupied by the first snows, typically in late October or early November. Meanwhile, a suitable land plot in town was purchased from the Union Pacific for the upcoming Dry Goods & Hardware store. That would be built and fully supplied once the house was finished, as the fickle Nebraska weather permitted.

 On September 20th, Zeb reached his sixteenth birthday. As part of the celebration, his father gifted him with a surprise: an 1858 Remington Sheriff model revolver, a .44 caliber, along with a new leather belted holster. “I shot this same kind of gun in the War a few times, Zeb. Its five and a half inch barrel is easier to draw from a holster than the eight inch Army version. It’s very reliable too, easy to load, and easy to take apart and clean. You can buy the pre-packed paper cartridges almost anywhere, or you can load the six-shot cylinder with powder, wadding, balls, and caps yourself. I can teach you how. You’ll need to practice with it a lot, though, before it becomes second nature. It’s a whole lot different than firing a rifle,” Gideon advised.

 “One more thing I want to warn you about, son, so listen carefully. Never pull your gun in a fight unless you aim to use it. A firearm is a serious responsibility, and you’re a man now. You’re still young enough to stay out of most trouble with other older, armed men. If you can avoid an argument or a gun fight, do so. There’s no real shame in simply walking away. But, if you are ever up against a really bad man – and they are some out there, believe me, just looking to kill or cripple the unsuspecting – then take a careful, deep look into his eyes. It’s going to be you or him then -- you can absolutely tell by his gaze just before he draws on you. You better beat his pull and go for him dead center. You’ve got to kill him, son. Trust me. Don’t hesitate even a second, or it’s going to be your funeral, not his. Promise?” Gideon asked. Zeb nodded somberly. Gideon rubbed his son’s head affectionately. "Good. That's my boy," he added, smiling.

 Over the next few weeks on his spare time from helping his father, Zeb practiced targeting a collection of old tin cans and glass bottles with his new gun -- preferring the use of pre-packed, store-bought cartridges to loading the revolver’s six-chambers himself with black powder, wadding, round balls, and firing caps. It took a while to get used to firing with just his right hand rather than with both hands, because the revolver gave quite a recoil with every shot. But gradually his action and aim became smoother.

 One day, Gideon had to ride a few miles west for the afternoon to help a new neighbor, Andy Weber. Becky and Landis were in town at the Railway Arms, so Zeb was alone, which was rather a rarity. He decided to take a secret break and ride into town on his horse, Pal, and slip into a saloon on the sly and sip his first whiskey. To fulfill his mental image as a real man now, Zeb strapped on his gun and holster. He had read a few dime novels about famous Western heroes and villains, and thought he knew how to act. He pushed his sweaty brown hair back and donned his hat, and remembered to put a silver dollar in his vest pocket to pay for his drink.

 The first of the three saloons he came upon in Ogallala was called the Last Chance. Zeb tethered his horse and boldly walked in, straightening his hat and trying to act confident and experienced. He saddled up to the long bar and put his foot on the bar rail.

 “Barkeep, I’ll take a whiskey,” Zeb called out. There were two other men at the far end of the bar, and three Union Pacific workers on furlough playing cards at a far table. The thin, elderly bartender, Rufus, smiled to Zeb, then put down a fresh glass in front of him after pulling it from under the counter. “Yer Pa know you’re in here, son?” he asked in a gentle, lowered voice. Zeb was taken aback, and blushed, and merely shook his head no.

 Just then, one of the two men at the end of the bar slid over. He was mean-looking, filthy with grime, grizzled, and half-drunk. Zeb was especially startled by the appearance of the menacing stranger’s nose. It was bulbous and inflamed, and scab-riddled. To make matters worse, the man kept scratching and picking at the infected skin of his nose between his words.

 “Did I hear this whelp ask for a whiskey, Rufus? Hell, he looks like he should still be drinking milk. What’s the matter, sonny, did you just finish sucking on yer mama’s tit? You ought to turn around and walk out the way ya come in, if you know what’s good for you. This ain’t no baby nursery, this here's a man’s bar…”

 The second man at the far end of the bar had since come over to view the commotion. The card players ignored everything, however, and kept their eyes down on their game.

 “Awe, come on, Bart, why don’t you leave the boy alone? He ain’t hurtin’ anyone,” the meek man pleaded.

 But Bart would have none of it. He pulled his revolver out in a flash, turned and cruelly pistol-whipped the man across the mouth, knocking him down in the process. A bloody tooth now lay on the floor. “Nobody tells me what to do, Chester, let alone some barfly scum like you. So shut your goddamn, shit-eating mouth and get the hell out of my face,” Bart roared. Then he spun around with angry, blood-shot eyes to face Zeb. “Now, didn’t I tell you to git the hell out of here, boy?” he hissed.

 Zeb was so taken aback by the rapid series of events that he froze. Remembering what his Pa had told him, he briefly considered reaching for his gun, but quickly realized that this crazy bully already had a lethal hog leg in his hand. Zeb Barnes also noticed that the man was oddly missing the last two fingers on his gun hand. Could he shoot accurately with that handicap? Zeb wondered. But just as quickly, the teen made his decision and carefully moved his own hand away from his own gun, and slowly backed out the saloon door. Old Rufus could do nothing, his age rendering him helpless to intervene.

 Shaky and confused with adrenaline, Zeb mounted Pal and left Ogallala in a daze. As he rode the three miles back to the Barnes home, he considered what, if anything, he should confess to his father about this unexpected incident. By the time he got home, the teen realized that he needed to tell the complete truth.

 Gideon rode up an hour later. Drinking from a dipper at their newly dug well, he asked his son what he had accomplished on the house construction. A contrite Zeb confessed what had taken place earlier in town.

 “You know that you shouldn’t have gone into town with your gun, first of all, son. Secondly, it’s a relief that nobody was shot. You were right to back off from a crazed drunk. Third, I’m going to punish you later for going off without telling me in advance. Lastly, we need to go back to town right now and tell the sheriff, then I want to meet with this Bart fellow and have some words,” Gideon outlined. “He was wrong to treat anyone like he treated you today, and I want him to know it.” Barnes then ordered Zeb to leave his gun in their almost-completed house and saddle up.

 When father and son returned to Ogallala and rode right up to the sheriff’s office, they found out from a passing townsperson that the sheriff -- Tom Gant -- had gone to Fort Sidney on business and wouldn’t be back for two more days. So Gideon and Zeb marched over together to the Last Chance. Rufus was behind the bar as expected, but the card game in the far corner of the saloon had ended. The room was empty, except for a sullen Bart, who was nursing still another whiskey in his usual spot at the far end of the long bar, scratching his swollen nose and staring off into space. The man hadn’t noticed either Gideon or Zeb come in. Barnes asked Rufus the man’s full name. “That’s Bart Mason,” Rufus replied. “Sorry I couldn’t help your boy earlier. I’m ashamed to admit that I’m too old to fight anymore. Plus, the sheriff is gone, elsewise I would have run over and gotten him to intervene,” the elderly barkeep confessed in a low voice.

 When Bart Mason heard his name mentioned, however, he turned and squinted, then recognized Zeb. “Well look who’s back! The whelp. And you brought a one-eyed cyclops, or maybe some kind of pirate, back with you. My, my…” he trailed off. He started to walk over, somewhat staggering.

 “I heard you had some harsh words here with my son earlier this afternoon, Mr. Mason. I figure you might want to apologize and make things right. How about it?” Gideon offered reasonably, but in a serious tone.

 “Hell, I’ve never gotten into the habit of apologizing to anyone, stranger. So you can just kiss my ass instead, huh?” Mason laughed harshly. “And the whelp can kiss my ass too after you’re done, for all I care,” Mason moved his three-fingered right hand slowly towards his holster.

 Gideon was ready. “Mister, I’ve had to deal with gutter trash like you all of my life. I tried to make it nice and easy for you, but if you want a fight, I’m your man. Come on out on the street right now and we’ll finish it proper,” Barnes coolly insisted. “I figured my killing days were over when the War ended, but it appears I was mistaken.”

 But as Gideon turned towards the door, his blind left eye wasn’t able to see that Mason had already drawn his gun. He cruelly shot Gideon in the back twice, then ran out the door as his victim fell, shoving a shocked Zeb aside in the movement. Bart unsteadily mounted his horse but then took off at a fierce gallop. Zeb and Rufus rushed to Gideon, but they were too late. Gideon Barnes -- Civil War veteran, beloved husband, father, and successful merchant – was dead, age 34.

 At the sounds of the gunshots, the nearby townsfolk instinctively converged at the Last Chance Saloon. That was when Rebecca Barnes saw her husband’s bloody body, and even Landis knew he had lost his father. Zeb himself was numb with fury. There was just one thing to do now. A day of reckoning and justice had to come...

 When Sheriff Gant returned from Fort Sidney, he got all the specifics about Gideon Barnes' cold-blooded murder. He immediately put out a detailed wanted poster -- based on Rufus' description -- for Bart Mason, and telegraphed the nearby authorities to be on the look-out. Then Tom rode out to pay his respects to Becky and her boys.

 After the funeral and burial, neighbors helped Zeb finish the Barnes’ house, and the family of three moved in after their furniture shipment arrived. Now it was mid-October, and the U.P. brought in multiple cords of firewood from Omaha for the town and the settlers to store up for the cold, harsh winter. Folks who couldn't afford the precious wood had to make do with gathering dry buffalo chips on the prairie for their fuel. Meanwhile, the Barnes Mercantile Store was now being built on the main street in Ogallala. Once completed, dry goods such as clothing, boots, hats, bolts of cloth, and assorted sundries (buttons, needles, ribbons, spools of thread, writing paper, pencils, soap, combs, brushes, hair pins and the like) -- as well as hardware and tools for the hardware annex-- would be delivered from the East and stocked. The growing town was eager for this new business to open, and the Barnes family could now visualize their future success -- as Gideon had earlier foreseen. But all the while, Zeb seethed under the surface with hatred, as he planned for vengeance and retribution. Bart Mason would die, just as sure as he had killed my father, Zeb swore.

 Barnes Mercantile opened in Ogallala on March 3, 1871, to a large crowd and much excitement. Although it was still too cold to paint the exterior of the building, the warm interior was coated in a soft yellow, with neatly stacked shelving and fully stocked bins and cabinets. Becky was overjoyed by the turnout, but she still wore her black mourning dress, and was deeply sad that Gideon had not lived to see this day. Not a day went by without her thinking about her late husband. Zeb and Landis, meanwhile, pitched in capably, with the teen handling most of the cash transactions in the hardware annex. Profits were outstanding from this first day and onward.

 When spring finally came, Zeb told his mother one morning after breakfast that he had to leave. "I've got to settle with Pa's killer, Ma. This is something that has to be done, so don't waste your breath trying to talk me out of it. You and Landis will be fine, plus our friends and neighbors and Sheriff Gant will look in from time to time and help if you need it. I love you, Ma, and I promise I'll be back in six weeks if I can't find Bart Mason by then. Sooner, of course, if I get him. Then we can live our lives in peace again, like Pa would have wanted," Zeb announced. After saddling Pal and packing his saddlebags with necessaries and checking his Remington, the young man kissed his mother and brother good bye. "Please be careful, Zebulon," Becky said through her tears. "I couldn't bear to lose another one of my men." Zeb silently nodded, pulled his hat down firmly, then headed north.

 Young Barnes scoured the bars and saloons of the Black Hills area of the Dakota Territory, riding into towns like Rapid City, Lead, and Deadwood. He described the three-fingered gunman with the hideous inflamed nose -- had anyone seen him? As his heart grew heavy from exhaustion and disappointment, Zeb hardened into manhood. He had his first whiskey, and then still more, over the coming weeks. The fiery liquid stopped burning after a while, but Zeb's hatred for Mason hadn't.

 After no luck, Zeb rode south then west towards Denver. Once, in the middle of nowhere, he spied his first Indians -- a band of five in the distance from an unknown tribe -- but they kept riding away in the opposite direction, so Zeb was never confronted or in danger. Eventually, he arrived in Denver. It was the largest city he had seen since Omaha, though only one-third as big. The large brick buildings and crowds of people were disconcerting, so Zeb was anxious to leave the dirt and chaos of the city, once his search for Mason was completed. Yet when young Barnes asked around, no one could ever remember seeing that particular outlaw. Disgusted at continuously hitting dead ends, Zeb headed back home to Ogallala, feeling bitter and defeated. His nearly six week's quest was fruitless. Not even a clue or one useful lead.

 Becky was overjoyed when her eldest son returned safely home, but she sensed how much he had changed in such a short time. His heart had remained restless, and his mind was elsewhere, still searching.

 The years went by. By 1875, former Supreme Commander of the Union Army, Ulysses S. Grant, was now President of the United States. Plans were also underway for the nation's 1876 Centennial celebration in Philadelphia the following year.

 Because Ogallala still had no doctor (although a school and church had recently been built, much to Becky's delight but Landis' dismay), and because the nearest sawbones was in North Platte some fifty miles to the east, Becky had set up a small counter in the Mercantile, and was now offering a limited selection of medicinal elixers, lotions, ointments, cough remedies, and pain pills. The Barnes' dry goods and hardware business continued to thrive, as the town itself continued to expand.

 Lately, Sheriff Tom Gant had been coming around more regularly to see Rebecca. A bachelor, he was becoming more and more sweet on Becky Barnes. Becky, in turn, was inviting him over often as well for Sunday dinner. Both of her sons were comfortable with this familiar guest, and Zeb, who would turn twenty-one this year, assumed that eventually his mother would re-marry. Tom occasionally asked Zeb in private if ever wanted to become his deputy -- part-time, of course, so he wouldn't have to entirely give up working at the store. "You've got the makings of a good peace officer, Zeb," Gant remarked. "Think it over." Meanwhile, Landis, age 9, was getting in and out of typical boy's mischief, but he was growing up fine and healthy too.

 One windy June day, a dark, bearded man walked into Barnes Mercantile after tying up his dusty mount on a hitching post. Becky was behind the main counter by the cash register, writing down an inventory of a newly arrived shipment of scissors and knives. Zeb happened to walk in from the hardware annex before his mother could stop and greet the stranger.

 It took Zeb but a second to look beyond the thick beard and matted, greasy hair to realize that the stranger was Bart Mason. There was no mistaking that swollen, scabbed nose. Bart smiled with a mouth full of decaying or missing teeth, looking like a mangy cur expecting a discarded bone. Then he scratched and rubbed his red facial bulb, using his dirty right hand with the missing two fingers.

 "It's nice to know that you still recognize me, Zeb Barnes. So the whelp done growed up. I hear tell that you've been trying to find me. Well, here I am!" he spat out, with a sick laugh.

 "I'm going to get the sheriff," Becky blurted out, as she boldly made her way from behind the counter and headed for the door. But Mason had other plans. He quickly grabbed Becky by the waist with his left hand, then pulled and cocked his gun with his right, pointing his deadly revolver at the woman's head. "Looks like we got ourselves a day of reckoning, Zeb. What you gonna do about it?" Bart sneered.

 Zeb's mind whirled, frantically searching for options, but he had earlier taken off his gun belt and laid it on a table for safety when he had gotten on a ladder to retrieve an item on a top shelf in the store. He could see the weapon now out of the corner of his eye. Did Mason notice? The Remington was just within reach if he dove for it and could slide it out of its holster.

 But what nobody was aware of was that Landis had snuck into the room unseen. He had been sweeping up in the hardware annex and wanted to ask his brother a question. When Landis saw what danger was happening, he crept behind Mason and whacked him as hard as he could in the leg with the broom and yelled, "You stop hurting my Ma!"

 Startled, Bart let go of Becky just enough for her to slip out of Mason's grasp and fall to the floor. Zeb saw his only chance. He dove for his revolver, pulled the weapon and spun around, then blasted two shots dead center into Bart's body. But the wily outlaw managed to squeeze off a shot as he went down, hitting Zeb in his gun arm. The Remington went flying away from his grip. Barnes felt the hot lead sear through his flesh.

 "Oh, you got me good there," the killer gasped, looking down at his two bleeding wounds. "But I ain't done for yet. It's still your day of reckoning, Barnes!" Bart Mason struggled to his feet, and pointed his gun at Zeb. "Time to meet your Pa, boy!" The outlaw steadied his three-fingered hand and got ready to shoot.

 But in the commotion, Rebecca had crawled back behind the counter where a loaded sawed-off shotgun rested -- a trick Gideon had used at their original store in Portsmouth, for protection against robbery. From four feet away she quickly fired one barrel into the back of Bart Mason. The blast blew a blood- and flesh- splattered hole the size of a dinner plate into the killer's back, knocking his body forward, his ugly and surprised face grimaced in horror as he fell.

 "Go to Hell where you belong," Rebecca Barnes barked at the dead intruder. She next rushed to Landis and Zeb, hugging them tight, then began trembling as she put the shotgun down, just as Sheriff Gant, who had heard the shots, rushed in the Mercantile with his gun drawn. Zeb's eyes met his mother's, and they both knew at that moment that the terrible ordeal was finally over...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 February 16, 2019