

The piano tinkled in the far corner of the smoke-filled drinking room – the downstairs of the only worthwhile saloon in Crow, Nevada, Population: 182. A lazy sort of Sunday afternoon mood hung in the air. None of the men here had been to the parish service that morning; the women here never went. The barkeep ran a damp rag over the worn but polished countertop, while the town drunk sat in the middle of the staircase, tapping his class to a tune no one else heard.

Near the center of the room, a round card table focused most of drowsy attention. On one side sat Isaiah Standish – gunslinger, privateer – squarely positioned in his chair, rearranging the cards in his hands. Ace, King, King, Two, Four – four Clubs and a heart. A husky-voiced brunette hung around his shoulders, giving him bad poker advice. More importantly, she distracted him from the heat and poured another two fingers from the whiskey bottle whenever his tumbler went dry. She would likely convince him to stay another night. There was a roundness about her that appealed to him, and she was the best company he’d had in several months. She leaned across him in a pleasant, bosomy sort of way and tapped the spare King. Ignoring her motion, he threw down the low cards in exchange for another set of low cards, both spades. She shrugged, not at all bothered that he dismissed her suggestion. He liked that about her.

The dealer was an old coot called Bandey; his old coot friend across the table had more scars than teeth and prattled on about some railroad heist they’d not quite pulled off together. The one sat to Standish’s left, the other to his right. It seemed as though they’d swapped stories a few too

many times. Said Toothless to the dealer: “You remember then, when ya kicked in the door to that - wassit called...”

“The moneycar.”

“Yeah, the moneycar, and standing there, more surprised than you even, stood half a’ Union Pacific issself? You remember that, Bandey? Uh.. I take none.”

Bandey nodded. “Yup.” He looked to the fourth man at the table.

Toothless hacked up a few laughs. “And then you said to that Matheson rat... What wassit? Uh... Say it agin.”

The dealer took on a steely-eyed tone that didn’t fit his grin-creased face. “What the hell are you doing in Colorado?!” The geezers both choked on their cackles before the dealer turned to the fourth man. “What fer you, sonny?”

‘Sonny’ was lean man, too young yet for gray. He sat a few feet back from the table and slouched. A scratched old two-shot hung in his belt. He was going to put a lot of money on this hand; he was telegraphing it like Western Union wireman. The woman on his lap, a pretty blond whose bodice revealed only enough to entice, called him Dusky, but it probably wasn’t his name. He had shiny coal for eyes and heavy black brows, and he chewed his lip whenever he thought he had a winning plan. He looked up to the blonde; she picked a single card and tossed it to the table. “One for us, Bandey.”

The blonde leaned over to clear the cards from the kitty and Bandey gawked at the eyeful. “How ‘come you never sit on my lap any more, Gracie? How ‘bout next round you slip over here and bring me some luck fer a change?”

Gracie giggled a firm no.

The bidding went too high for the coots first time around. Just as he thought, the other man started it high - five dollars. It got up to twenty-three by the end of the flop when Standish called him. The kid threw down a full house, Ace high, that didn’t even touch the flop. Standish was sure as hell he’d seen one of those aces just last hand. Pulling away from the woman behind him, he leaned across the table and mustered his gravelly voice of doom. “You’re cheatin’, sure as I’m gonna burn... Gimme those cards.” No way was he going to lose twenty-three dollars in a town like this.

Gracie took the cards and held them to her chest, lips tight. “Not if you’re going to be rude about it.” She retreated behind the dark man’s shoulder.

Standish threw up the table, sending cards, chips, and cups flying. The table landed on its side between him and the other man, a low wall between them. “Give me those CARDS!”

The man’s hand went reflexively to his belt but stopped. Standish couldn’t see it behind the table, but he knew it flinched eagerly around the grip.

The others at the table fled to the sides of the room.

“Go ahead,” sneered Standish. “Draw. Draw, you yellow-bellied rat!” He swung for his own gun to find an empty belt. His mind raced up the stairs to his room, to his bed, where, spread out on the sheets, sat a disassembled six-shooter in the middle of a cleaning. The sound of his head hitting the boards was louder than the two shots. That was the last thing he noticed.

Will Hackett stepped off the train in Applebranch, his boot heels grinding into the grit on the station platform. He had a pair of saddlebags slung over his shoulder and a repeater rifle in his left hand. A mostly burned-out cigarette sat perched between his lips, smoke twisting up in the windless air. He looked around, his eyes squinting and creased beneath the brim of his hat. The air was thin and dry, and the morning sun blindingly bright. Spots of blazing yellow reflected off unshuttered windows and polished buckles and even the tin roofs, and made it painful to look most anywhere. As people with bags and trunks and parcels bustled around the platform around him, he raised a hand to shade his eyes and read the painted wooden signs posted above the buildings. He stepped out into the street. More grit. Nevada was full of grit.

He found the Sheriff’s office, just down the street from the station. He was expected there about this time, so he flicked his cigarette down into the sand and ground it beneath his heel, then pushed the door open. The Badge inside seemed a pleasant sort – he sat with his feet propped up on his desk and wanted to yak about anything. Will exchanged a few pleasantries with him, talked about the heat a bit, and

looked at a few wanted posters. He was a busy man, though, with a job to do, so after about ten minutes the sheriff took him out back and saddled up a loaner horse for him, a Palomino with strong legs and a name from some book he hadn't read. The sheriff would have gone on talking all day, but Will mounted up and thanked him, then turned out onto the street. He tipped his hat to a couple of ladies who crossed the street in front of him, then tugged the reins in the direction of the hills, toward the town of Crow. It was still an hour before noon, so he figured on making it there before dusk.

Will had only been to Crow once, a few years back, right after the whole business with Pete Maloney came down, and he needed a place to leave the state's witnesses. The place wasn't big enough to be on many maps, which was one of the reasons he had picked it then. Another was that the folks there didn't care much for making a name for themselves, or drawing in any strangers. It looked like they didn't have much choice in the matter now.

The first thing Will did when he got to the town was make a call on the Mayor's house. It was a big affair, right on the street, all painted up white and with a carefully tended garden fenced off out front. The Mayor's wife, a tall woman with a sharp face, said her husband wasn't in and wasn't going to be back till later the next day. He hadn't said where he was going, but she figured it was probably Percy Harris's place.

So Will crossed the street to the Sheriff's office, which had a sign reading 'General Store', but only the deputy/clerk was there. The deputy was an Indian fellow named Joe, and

he seemed all right. He offered Will a chair looking out over the street, and they sat and talked for a spell. He had been told to expect Will in a note left on the desk by the Sheriff. Joe leaned back in his chair and smoked a cigar while he talked, and his eyes flicked down to the badge pinned on his shirt from time to time. He said he'd only been deputized yesterday. There wasn't usually much call for a sheriff, much less a deputy, up until recent events. Will nodded and said he understood. The deputy seemed eager to help, but he'd been out on the reservation until yesterday morning, so he didn't know much. Will asked him to say what he did know.

"The Sheriff did not say where he was going, though I believe he and the Mayor are with Percy Harris at his home. Percy is the one you want to see?" He waited for Will to nod before going on. "No one who knows will say exactly what happened out there, but the whole town speaks in whispers and hides their conversations behind their hands."

"Where does Harris live at?"

"He is the undertaker." Joe seemed to think that was an answer, but Will arched his brows and the Indian continued. "He lives in the shack near the cemetery. He did not take the job by choice, but when the old undertaker died, no one else would do it. The town voted him the job." Joe shook his head and blew out smoke. He pointed in a general direction out the window with the butt of his cigar. "Follow that road there until a hoofpath branches north. A half-mile up that path is the cemetery."

Will thanked the man for his time and rose to go. As he tugged on his coat he paused to ask where Jeb Smith and John Bandey were likely to be. Joe smiled. The answer he gave wasn't surprising.

It was dark by the time Will left the sheriff's office. Outside the air was dead and still hot, and the streets were empty except for a couple of dogs chasing each other around. The Indian was stabling the Palomino for him, so he carried his saddlebags and rifle as he walked over to the saloon. It wasn't more than a few steps. He pushed through the swinging doors and stopped to size the place up. It hadn't changed much. It was a decent establishment, considering the town it was in. There was a fair assortment of liquor, and the bartender seemed to keep the place clean. Most of the several tables were in use. There was a buzz of conversation in the room, but no one spoke loud enough to be heard above the others. A few people eyed him suspiciously. A couple of women of easy virtue were over by the bar, watching to see who had a few extra dollars to spend. A poster of Roosevelt hung above the bar, as did those of Calamity Jane and James Hickok. Will smiled and tipped his hat to Hickok. One of the harlots, the one leaning against the bar with dark hair and a pleasant-looking roundness, seemed to think the motion directed at her. She smiled, and looked him up and down, stopping just as she came on his badge. She didn't falter much, but her smile changed considerably. She leaned back against the bar.

Jeb and Bandey were at a table in the back corner and were seemingly engrossed in yarn-spinning and lie-telling, but the way they were hiding their faces beneath their hats and staring at a blank wall let Will know they had seen him

already. He crossed to where they sat and, just for the effect, set his fists down hard on the table. Jeb jumped and slopped beer onto his shirt. Will spoke loud enough for most of the saloon to hear, even over the unchristian jangling of the piano player in the corner. "Wull, hullo there, boys. Jebediah. John. How're you two coming along here?"

Bandey scratched at the stubble on his chin – he was too wrinkled for a clean shave. Jeb muttered curses and was wringing out his shirt. Neither of them seemed terribly anxious to be the first to reply, but Bandey finally raised his eyes and forced a smile. He was always the leader of the two. "Well..." He began slowly, but put on a surprised voice; "I'll be damned if it ain't Will Hackett. Our good friend Will Hackett. What brings you out this way, Marshal?"

Jeb pushed his hat back and mumbled the answer for him. "Ain't fer anything we done, no sir. Ain't broken a dang law since we been here, ain't that right? E'en joined to the parish, we did."

Will smiled. He had clean, strong teeth and a mustache that drooped over either side of his mouth. It was a wholesome look - stern, full of justice. "Is that right? What's your favorite psalm? No, no... Don't strain. You two've been doing good, I reckon – haven't heard otherwise... I was in the town and I thought I'd see how you were coming along. Listen, I thought maybe you could help me out a bit. Talk with me a piece?" They nodded because they didn't have much choice in the matter.

They didn't let on to knowing too much to begin with, what with old habits and all, but Jeb was a real talker once someone got him started. It seemed they knew this Percy Harris fellow well enough – they thought he was a good kid, a bit quiet maybe. They knew where he lived, and they'd even been playing cards with him when Isaiah Standish had been shot. As Jeb would have it, this Percy caught Standish in a fair draw. But Will knew Jeb's stories, and he'd heard enough of Standish to know that the man was fast. He wasn't the fastest, and he wasn't wanted, but he rode with a mean crowd, and no one in Nevada would draw on him if they knew who he was. If this Percy was quick enough to beat him fair, Will would've heard of him for certain – he would've made some kind of name for himself. Well, maybe not, if his name was *Percy*.

Bandey didn't have much to add to Jeb's story, but he did prod a bit about maybe being let out of Crow. "After all," he said, "We're gettin' a bit long in the tooth, and this ain't a bad place, you understand, but I wouldn't want to die here. We did our part, right? Maybe Reno'd be better, I'm thinkin'." Jeb grunted his two bits' worth of agreement.

Will shook his head. "No, no... You two aren't backing out now, are you? Ready to run already?"

Bandey pressed his lips together until they turned white, but he didn't say a thing.

"Look, you know Crooker wasn't too happy with this arrangement to begin with, and he'd just as soon see you in the other box in his courthouse. Neither of you've served a

day for all of what you've done, and it seems to me like you're getting a pretty good deal already."

Jeb piped in, poking the table with a boney finger. "We brought in Pete Maloney alive and testified fer a judge. Ain't that something? We ain't done a thing bad since you put us here. We're changed men, Marshal."

"Maloney was just enough to put Crooker in a mood to listen to your fool deal, and I think that mood's probably worn off by now. Nah... I think you two goats better make yourselves comfortable right here... Any more fooling around with deals and you're liable to find yourself on the wrong side of some bars. Or maybe on the business end of a rope, if he knew about what you two did in Carson City."

They weren't exactly happy about that, but they didn't say anything more, either.

Will didn't much like the idea of waiting until the next morning to see Percy Harris, but it was a new moon and the stars weren't good enough for picking out unfamiliar footpaths, and he didn't particularly care for the idea of falling into a dug-up grave in the middle of the night. He paid for the room upstairs, minus any embellishments or company, and turned in.

He was a light sleeper anyway, but the footsteps coming up the stairs should have been enough to wake the whole town. It was still dark, probably not too far from morning, but his eyes were adjusted. He reached down under the bed and felt for his rifle. It was there, in easy reach, how he always kept it. He laid it across his chest and tried to count

the number of feet. There were two pair at least, maybe three. Definitely three. No muffled whispers, and no talking. When the feet stopped outside his door and a knife blade slipped in by the doorframe to push back the bolt, Will sat up and took aim. The first man through was too surprised to do anything stupid; he froze in the doorway, but the man behind him blinked and went for a gun, buying a slug for each of them. Will jumped to his feet just as the third pair of feet started down the stairs, too fast, as a crash and a thud followed. Will leaned out over the two bodies in the doorway and aimed, down through the balustrade to where the man at the bottom sprawled, unmoving.

The shot to the back of Will's shoulder sent him down hard, over the bodies at his feet and to the wooden slats of the balcony. His rifle lay beneath a now useless hand. He rolled himself off his chest and looked up to see the bartender standing over him with revolver aimed at his head. An old man's voice from below called out, "Is he dead?" and the bartender pulled the trigger, turning the world black.

Percy sat in his shack, in the old and creaky chair – the only chair – and stared at nothing with red eyes. He ran fingers through his black hair and tugged nervously at it.

The Sheriff had sprawled out to sleep on the bed, and the Mayor stood by the window, peering out. A couple of other men from the town had dozed off leaning against the wall. The Mayor had a rifle propped up against his leg and he was smoking a pipe, which wasn't doing much to calm him

down. He was irritable. "Percy, either you watch a window, or you get some sleep. You ain't doin' anybody any good doin' that. Just sittin' there. You hear me?"

Percy blinked and looked up at the Mayor. It was even darker inside than out, and all he could see was a silhouette of the man against the window and the glow of his pipe. He stood up, slowly, and trudged over to the Mayor. "I can't sleep. Not with who'all might be out there."

The Mayor clenched the pipe-bit between his teeth as he talked. "Nobody's comin' tonight, not this late. It's just an hour or two 'til light. The Marshal'll be in town by now – tomorrow morning Joe'll bring him out, and he'll take care of things."

Percy squinted and peered out the window, into the night. Rocks and shrubbery could look like men with guns when the stars were half clouded-over. Or men with guns could look like shrubbery. He was lucky that day... lucky or *something*. Nothing he could count on again, for certain.

He had been digging Isaiah Standish's grave and was pretty much lost in his thoughts. It was odd thing, to dig a grave for the man he'd shot. He didn't really feel too bad about killing the man – he didn't know him, and he wasn't really to blame, either. He hadn't been cheating, regardless, and the man drew on him first. Never mind the man had no gun; Percy couldn't see that from the other side of the table. The Sheriff said that the man was a gunslinger, too, and

rode with a nasty crowd, so he got what he deserved, more than likely.

Percy's spade had struck something hard when he was thinking and digging – a rock, or some packed dirt, or maybe another coffin, he didn't really pay much attention – and that meant it was time to draw a bit of water for a drink and to wipe down his face. It was the middle of the day and the wind burned when it picked up.

He was leaning against the old cypress tree when those five men rode up and stopped in a loose half-circle around his side of the tree. He didn't know them from Adam, but when the Sheriff saw them later he said they were some from that same nasty crowd as Standish. They all had black, wide-brimmed hats with a leather thong draped off the back, and their coats had some kind of piping on the sleeves – almost cavalry-like. They looked pretty hard, mostly, pretty grizzled and scarred up. One of them had a long brush of a beard and a long rifle slung over his back. The rest of them had revolvers hanging from their sides and enough bullets in their belts to put down a small army. The leader of them – or Percy guessed he was the leader – pulled sideways on his reins, and his horse sidled up under the tree. He had a smug look and an oily black mustache that covered his mouth. He was wearing leather gloves. He studied Percy a bit before speaking.

“D’you know Isaiah Standish?” He folded his arms over the saddle and slouched. His accent was odd. Maybe he was a Texan.

These men looked like trouble, and Percy wasn't much for trouble. He motioned with the handle of his spade. “That's his grave over there.”

“Folks say you was the one that shot ‘im.” That was the rifleman, and he had the same accent.

The leader said, “We was sorta friends with ‘im, see. Compadres. They sez you shot ‘im unarmed, an’ that just don't seem right. Does it seem right to you?” Quick as a whip, the man had grabbed Percy by the collar and shoved a revolver into his face. He cocked the gun. “Does it?”

Percy thought he might have peed his pants, but it didn't seem a good time to check. “No, sir. But it wasn't quite like that...”

The man cut him short, pulling him closer, and leaned over so their hat brims overlapped. “I think we heard the story already, Percy. That's yer name, innit? Per-see-vaul?” A couple of the other men snickered.

Percy's face was burning already, so there wasn't much more room for a blush. He nodded to the man's question.

“Well, good then. I'z afraid there fer a minute that we'd got the wrong fellow. You seem too yellow an' pissy to be someone who coulda shot Isaiah. But maybe not if he was empty-handed, eh? Well, I reckon what you said's as good as a confession, and the punishment for yella-bellied cold-blooded murder in Christian parts is hangin'. Until dead.” Percy squeezed his eyes shut as the other men jeered.

One of the other men already had a noose tied up, so they all dismounted and bound Percy's wrists and ankles. The knots weren't good, but they all had guns, so what did it matter? They threw the noose over a high branch in the tree and were ready to hoist him when he decided to have a go at yelling and screaming, hoping someone was in earshot. Nobody was, but the leader – who the other men called Wes – punched him in the gut and told him he'd shoot him in the shin if he yelled again.

He was about to yell again anyway, but one of the other men was standing over the hole for Standish's coffin and yelling and waving his hand frantically. "Wes! Leave off an' git yer ass over here!"

Wes looked over at the man and back at Percy, and then headed over to the grave. The rifleman and the skinny guy followed him over, but a barrel-chested man with a scar cutting through his nose stayed to hold the other end of Percy's noose, to keep him from slipping off anywhere safer. Over at the hole, Wes had taken off his hat and was crouching to peer down in. The man who had called him over had jumped down into the grave and was digging with the toe of his boot.

The barrel-chested man was a little distracted with watching the others, so Percy tugged the bindings off his wrists and let them fall to the ground. He twisted his boots, as quickly and quietly as possible, until his ankles were loose. Scar-nose hadn't yet noticed. Just then, the man in the grave let out a wild whoop, and the other men were yelling and pulling him out. Wes had jumped in next and was calling for someone to bring him the damned spade.

The barrel-chested man was about to drop the rope and go join the others when Percy caught him off-balance and knocked him to the ground and kicked him in the gut and again in the face. Percy was yelling again now, and had just enough time to get around to the other side of the tree before bullets spat past him and thunked through the siding of his shack.

That's when the ...the luck must've started. He heard the men running closer, toward the tree, but suddenly they were shouting and shooting and screaming. He crouched and turned, taking a cautious glance over the roots of the cypress, and six or seven other men were out there tangling with them.

Percy watched, open-mouthed, as Wes emptied his revolver into one of the strange men – a tall, lean fellow with dust-covered black clothes. But the bullets didn't seem to hurt the man – much less stop him – and he jumped at Wes like he hadn't been touched. The bullets were real enough, though, when two of them continued through the tall man, hit the rifleman in the back and sent him to the dust. The tall man caught Wes by his coat and threw him to the ground, landing on top of him. Wes had a knife out, but the man grabbed his wrist and twisted it, forcing the blade back between Wes's own ribs. The other men riding with Wes were dead by now, two shot and one strangled with a whip. Percy looked down to see the barrel-chested man moving at his feet, so he grabbed the spade and smacked him across the head with it. That kept him quiet.

Percy stumbled down to where the strange men were still standing – there were six of them, he saw, and they'd

gathered between a few of the bodies like they were at a social. His heart was beating as hard as an Indian drum, but he started feeling odd when he drew nearer to them: his skin tingled, and the hair on his neck and arms stood on end. He blinked, and looked again as he seemed to see through the men a bit. They were sort of like dirty glass, when you can only just make out what's on the other side. They were talking, too, but they weren't making any noise. The tall man in black turned to Percy and spoke, but this time his voice was enough to smite Percy where he stood. It sounded like an old squeaky door hinge with someone kicking a dog in the back for good measure. Percy couldn't understand a word of it, but he nodded when the man smiled like he should answer, and shook his hand with only a little hesitation when he held it out. It felt like ... dusty mud. Or something.

The man leaned closer and Percy flinched. He was speaking a bit louder and slower now. "I said, what is your name, boy?"

Percy blinked. "Percy. Harris."

The man smiled again. "Percival... It's a good name.. I knew a Percival, he was an Ingleton, though, and he-"

An old man with few teeth and a floppy tall hat elbowed the tall man in the side. "Shet up, Jefferson." His voice was a bit more understandable – it was more like the sound of old, rusted steel scraping together in the wind. "He don't wanna hear yer stories. Percy, is it? I'm Tom Erie, and pleased to meet you." He shook Percy's hand, too, and introductions went all around.

"You are more quiet zan ze last man," said another man, wrinkled and bitter, and with a German accent. Sort of, if glass breaking could have a German accent. His name was Karl. "He used to sing and chatter away like ve had nozing better to do zan listen, and he made up stories about us all. He said I vas ze bank robber and best dead. He kept us all awake."

Thomas shushed him. "He war'nt as bad as all that. He sed I was a Calvalry Captain. He had a perty 'mazing Grace,' too."

Then they were all yawning and saying their good-byes, and they all headed off, each to a particular gravestone. Percy saw that the names on the gravestones matched the ones they had given him. Peter Jefferson. Thomas Erie. Frank Rutherford. John White. Karl Wolstrom. Jack North's grave was marked Anonymous, but he had an easterner's accent. Percy watched, not having spoken since saying his name, as each man settled down through the earth like someone tucking in to bed. Before he disappeared altogether, Tom turned his eyes to Isaiah's grave, then looked up at Percy. "You'd do well to bury that agin, Percy. And fergit you saw it. It's e'en more trouble than it looks."

Percy stood there for a few minutes, then got on one of the would-be lyncher's horses and rode into town. The Sheriff would know what to do.

He hadn't spoken more than two sentences on the whole ride back with the Sheriff. The Sheriff took a look around, turning the dead men's faces with his boot. He named

them. “Wes Sheridan. James Rigley.” That was the rifleman. “Hank Stapleton. I don’t know the other two, but I’d wager they’re just as tough. You got the drop on them now, too?”

Percy just shrugged.

The Sheriff shook his head. “I don’t know what’s got into you, Percy, but yer gonna have a name fer yerself here soon, if you don’t watch it.” The Sheriff scuffed his boot on a rock as he walked over to where Isaiah’s half-dug grave laid open, and glanced down. He stopped himself, and looked down again, focusing his eyes, and then crouched and reached down. He shook his head again and blew out a long breath.

Percy walked over to the grave to see what it was he was looking at. He blinked.

The Sheriff brushed a bit of dirt away. “Good Lord. I don’t think that’s glass.”

Percy rubbed his neck as he looked out the window with the Mayor, staring into the suggestive night. There was still a red mark from where the noose had chafed against his neck, and it was a bit tender. He hadn’t told anyone about the ... men who had gotten out of their graves to help him. He’d been laughed at before, and he liked this new ‘reputation’ he was getting: tough, fast. That suited him fine. Maybe he’d look into becoming a lawman when this was over.

Morning came an hour or so later. The Mayor nudged the other men awake with his rifle butt and they shared a pot of coffee and some biscuits. The Marshal, if he’d come on time, was supposed to ride out later in the morning along with some men from town and dig the whole grave up. The Mayor slept for a few hours, and the shadows disappeared as the sun went to noon, but no one came. James Young, the man who’d taken the first watch during the night, suggested one of them ride into town, but just then the Sheriff yelled and waved them to the windows.

Some men were coming up the wagonpath all right, but they had a mean set to them. They had spades and picks for digging, but most of them had guns, too. There were about twenty of them altogether. Some of them had their faces covered. The Sheriff hollered out the window, “Where’s the Marshal there?”

The group stopped. A man in front with a non-descript coat and a kerchief over his nose and mouth shouted back. It was Robert, the bartender. “I reckon he couldn’t make it, Sheriff. Y’all want to come out? We’re here to help you dig up that grave, now.”

The Sheriff put a hand on the barrel of his rifle and pulled it up alongside him. “You want to tell me why y’all got guns with you, Robert? They don’t help much with the diggin’.”

From where he was standing, the bartender tucked his thumbs into his belt and yelled. “We gotta keep protected, Sheriff. We heard about those five men coming up here and shootin’ it out. Who’s to say they don’t got buddies, and a

lot of ‘em, who’ll want a little revenge and maybe a piece of that grave?”

The Sheriff was not put off. “How ’bout you lay down those guns there and come on up to dig. We’ll watch yer backs for you.”

Tired with the conversation, Robert pulled a pistol from behind his belt and took a bad shot at the Sheriff’s window. On a cue a swarm of riders – all with the same black hats and wearing jackets with piping on the sleeves – wheeled out from behind a stand of rocks that hid the path as it wound back along the hill. They passed up the twenty men and drove in toward the shack, pulling out revolvers and rifles and firing at the windows. The Sheriff picked one off before ducking away from the splintering glass. The Mayor and the other men inside all went for their guns and then for the windows to fire back at the riders. All but Percy, who grabbed the revolvers he had taken off Wes’s corpse and made a dash for the back door. He kicked it open in time to see a pair of riders were dismounting just outside; the first got a bullet to the neck before he looked, and Percy beat the second with a shot to the shoulder and another to the chest. He shot the first one again just to be sure. When he rounded the corner, though, he saw that the riders had made it up to the outside of the windows and were taking barrel shots inside. Not many shots were being returned. Robert and his men were running up behind to join them, though several veered off toward Isaiah’s open grave, eager to beat the rest of them there. Percy shot one of the riders off his horse and put down a man with a pick and a rifle before he was noticed and fired on.

Then the earth opened like a dozen hungry mouths, and everything started getting a bit odd again.

What was left of the town breathed a collective sigh of relief when the iron-clad Marshal’s wagon disappeared over the hill, contents well guarded. A few people lingered in the streets to watch it go and contemplate fortunes lost. The Sheriff was acting as temporary Mayor until the position could be filled, despite having to use crutches to get around and having had most of his left ear shot off. The reservation was notified of Joe’s murder, and two of his sisters and a brother came out to claim the body and form their own opinions on the matter. Once the saloon was boarded up, Gracie and Rhonda went to stay with the Mayor’s wife, who managed to find attire a bit more modest for both them and vowed to find them new professions. There was a newspaper man around somewhere still, and two of the Marshals were going to be back inside a week.

The Marshals had asked to see Percy, but he wasn’t to be found with any amount of searching. Everyone figured he must have come back to gather his belongings, though, because his shack was bare the next day. Gracie was awfully quiet, too, and she had taken a few walks out that direction.

Percy sat on the back of his horse and fingered the guns at his belt. They had been Wes Sheridan’s – they had his initials in silver on the bottom – and the horse had been

Stapleton's. Percy had decided to call it California. He had Rigley's rifle and whip, too. They were all his now, he figured, since the dead men didn't need them anymore.

He shaded his eyes with a hand and watched the Marshal's iron wagon rumble along the road on the other side of the wash. He knew better than any of them what was inside, once he'd had a long talk with those ghosts. It sure as hell – and heaven – wasn't glass.

Somebody in Reno might hear the name 'Adam's Key' thrown around and know what it meant, but someone in Frisco definitely would. And they'd talk. It didn't matter what happened to the gold plates, but if word got out that a cube-cut diamond the size of his head was traveling across the country with only a handful of Marshals guarding it... well, it was as good as stolen, and then it would disappear again. Or worse – it would be cut down into saleable stones and sold off in bits. And then we'd all be out of luck, wouldn't we?

He wouldn't let that happen. He'd made promises, taken an oath, and now those ghosts were sleeping like good Christian souls should. It was his charge now.

Percy pulled on the reins and tapped his heels against California's flanks, setting in after the wagon at an easy amble.