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**SON AGAINST FATHER FOR RANGELAND JUSTICE**

# **SHOWDOWN at WARBIIRD**

**EDWIN BOOTH**  
complete novel





## **"HE COULDN'T DRAW AGAINST HIS OWN FATHER!"**

Yet Neil Wallace was positive that his father wouldn't be restrained by any such scruples. Nevertheless, he had to tell him why a son might have to turn against his own blood:

"It's because you're trying to do something no man has a right to do. You're trying to make slaves out of free men . . . and you're not going to get away with it. Your scheme is going to blow sky high—and you along with it!"

And with those words, range war exploded in all its bloody fury, setting off a dynamite relay of greed, revenge, and gunpowder temper that threatened to destroy Neil and the ranchers he defended.

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

NEIL WALLACE

To be a good son, he'd have to be a better gunslinger.

KING WALLACE

His manner was more ruthless than regal.

HUB TALBERT

Being all things to all men still means you're somebody's enemy.

MARSHAL MULHOLLAND

He was King Wallace's boy until he became his own man.

DELIGHT DUBOIS

She was a designin' woman and it didn't make a pretty picture.

FRANCESCA

There was one way to make sure she'd be with the man she loved. . . .

# ***Showdown at Warbird***

by

**EDWIN BOOTH**

**ACE BOOKS**

A Division of A. A. Wyn, Inc.

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## Chapter One

THE GRIMY three-car train groaned around a curve and straightened out for the last pull into Kingvale, its whistle sounding mournfully across the unbroken Wyoming landscape. A cloud of black smoke drifted past the window, blotting out the view, and Neil turned away to find the Englishman watching him with a trace of amusement in his glance. As their eyes met, the Englishman rose to his feet, holding onto the back of the seat with his left hand to brace himself against the swaying of the car.

"I've enjoyed your company, Mr. Wallace," he said. "Come and see me when you get time." He held out his right hand.

Neil took the hand in his own rope-calloused fingers. "I'll do that, Mr. Davenport. You've made the trip a lot pleasanter." He got to his feet, spreading his legs to keep from being thrown off balance. "A long train ride can get mighty monotonous with nobody to talk to."

"Agreed." The Englishman was smiling, but his smile faded and he glanced out the window thoughtfully, then back at Neil. "The time may come, Mr. Wallace, when you'll long for monotony. It's a pretty scarce article here in the valley." The smile returned. "At any rate, I hope we can be friends even though—"

The last of his words were blotted out by the screech of the iron wheels as the train ground to a stop, and Neil found himself wondering what Davenport had been about

to say. There had been a somber tone to the words, as though the man had been about to warn him of something. But the Englishman had already started toward the vestibule, so Neil turned to the back of the car, picked up his war-bag in his left hand, and used his right to swing his saddle across his back.

Walking back up the aisle, Neil had to duck to look out the windows. There was a group of men lounging in the shade of the depot, a shabby little building which apparently hadn't been painted in the eight years he'd been away. Except for the word *Kingvale*, that is, which had been added in his absence, although the name he was used to, *Horseshoe Bend*, was still faintly discernible beneath the new paint. The alteration didn't please him, indicating, as it did, that his father, King Wallace, still held the town in his power.

Reaching the platform, he looked up to see that Davenport had stopped to speak to the men by the depot, all of whom seemed to know him. One by one, they turned their eyes from Davenport to Neil, their expressions becoming watchful, perhaps suspicious.

Neil frowned, puzzled at their wariness. One of the loungers, he recognized—a smallish man by the name of Hub Talbert. He let his gaze move down the line, finding the same expression on all five faces. It occurred to him that they were waiting for him to make the first move, so he put down the saddle, held out his right hand and stepped toward Talbert, bringing his lips into a smile.

"Howdy, Mr. Talbert," he said. "I guess you wouldn't remember me. I'm Neil Wallace."

Talbert pushed himself away from the building and looked up at Neil uncertainly. Neil remembered him as a shifty sort of man, and saw immediately that he hadn't changed in eight years except to get more round-shouldered.



Now Talbert glanced uneasily at the other four men, then started to hold out his hand. "Sure, Neil. I remember—"

Before he could finish, another voice cut in from beyond the depot. "Don't dirty your hands on that two-bit rancher, Wallace. He ain't your friend."

Surprised and a little angry, Neil looked around at the speaker, who was seated in a buckboard at the edge of the platform. He was a big man, about as big as Neil, with the hard leanness of one who had spent much of his time in the saddle. There was a half-grin on his lips, but his eyes were cold. He had turned to the seat so that the pistol strapped to his right leg was handy to his draw, but he was making no move in that direction.

Neil turned back toward Talbert, who was now staring at the ground, an angry flush in his cheeks. The other men wouldn't meet Neil's eyes nor did they speak. Another thing Neil noticed was that they were all careful to keep their hands away from their guns. It was an odd situation, but one about which there was little he could do until he understood what was behind it. He stepped back to pick up his saddle, then walked over to confront the man in the buckboard.

"Get in," the man said. "The boss is expectin' you." His lips curled into a grin again. "In case you've forgotten, King Wallace don't like to wait for people."

Neil's anger mounted, but he held it in check. He tossed his gear in the back of the buckboard and got in alongside the driver. The reins slapped against the horses' rumps and the team headed up the short main street of Kingvale, with its two rows of false-fronted frame buildings, all as badly in need of paint as the depot.

At the end of town, the driver turned his head and grinned. "Guess I should've told you," he said. "I'm Flake

Bridger, your old man's ramrod." He held out his hand and Neil took it, surprised at the sudden change of attitude.

"Didn't like to be so blunt about it back there," Bridger said, "but I figured you wouldn't know the setup around here and I didn't want you makin' a mistake before you had a chance to find out." He turned to spit into the road. "Them fellers back there at the depot—they all hate your guts. Hub Talbert most of all."

Neil looked at the foreman out of the corner of his eye. "That's a funny thing, now," he said with careful casualness. "The only one of those men I remember is Talbert, and we never had any trouble that I recall."

The foreman guided the buckboard expertly around a bend in the rutted road, then turned his head. "You're a Wallace, ain't you?" He frowned. "Which makes me think—how come you was sittin' with that Englishman when the train pulled in?"

His attitude was irritating, but Neil forced himself to answer calmly. "We were just talking. Why? Is there any reason I shouldn't be sitting with Davenport?"

Bridger shrugged. "That's between you and King. I was just askin'."

They rode in silence after that, Neil's mind working on the events of the last half hour. He had expected to find a certain amount of unpleasantness when he'd agreed to return to Wyoming, but nothing like this animosity between his father and the men at the depot. Even allowing for the fact that King Wallace had always been an unpredictable sort of man, a fact Neil had recognized early in life, still there had been no indication in those days that King's unruly nature would ever lead to anything like this.

He glanced at Bridger without turning his head. This new ramrod—having him on the payroll was a tip-off in it-

self. Neil had met gunslingers before and he could recognize the look in Bridger's eyes.

He rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. A man was a fool to come back to a situation like this, especially when it meant leaving a good foreman's job in Kansas. On the other hand, could a man be expected to deny a dying mother's last request? And maybe his mother had been right, after all. Maybe King Wallace still wanted him back on Warbird. Or maybe it was just a repentant woman's mistaken idea of how she could make up for deserting her husband and making him look like a fool in the eyes of his neighbors. At any rate, the promise had been made; now he had to go through with it. Likely his father would be glad to send him packing, in which case all he would be out was a month's wages.

The road they were traversing ran along the north side of New San Juan Creek, or rather, the northeast side, since the creek came through the valley on a slant, angling out of the mountains at the northwestern extremity of the valley, breaking clear of the foothills on Stubby Stubblefield's Box-S. By squinting, Neil could see smoke rising from Stubby's place now, although it was several miles distant.

Warbird ranch, for which they were headed, was considerably closer, but the buildings of the home place would not be visible until they turned off the road and crossed the big hogback which lay like a long flat haystack almost the length of the valley. Actually, they were already on Warbird land, for King Wallace's boundary was New San Juan Creek, and the road was mostly on his property.

In earlier days, the creek had followed a different channel, one which took it on the other side of the hogback—the side on which Warbird's buildings lay. Later, however, a big rockslide on what was now Box-S had buried the creek under tons of silt, forcing the water to find another channel,

the one which it now followed. The original San Juan Creek was now known as Dry Creek, and was overgrown with brush although it still lay like a gash across Warbird range.

Neil looked across the creek, recognizing the boundaries of the several small ranches which lay on the southerly side, each ranch with its land bordering the creek for a greater or smaller distance. They had already passed one small spread, which the Englishman had told him was now his, and were halfway past Will Turner's Broken Bow, which had been a second home to Neil, by the time the Warbird turned off and began to ascent the gentle slope of the hog-back.

The horses slowed to a walk as they started up the hill, and Neil found himself watching a little eagerly for his first sight of Warbird. Then they topped the rise and Bridger pulled the team to a halt. He turned to grin at Neil and said pleasantly, "There she is—there's Warbird."

It was hard to get used to the sudden changes in Bridger's attitude, but Neil didn't stop to think about it. He studied the buildings below him with interest, noting the new horse barn, the well-built corrals, and the rock bunkhouse.

Bridger apparently saw the direction of his gaze. "Your old man used to fight Indians from behind them rock walls," he remarked.

Neil didn't answer. He was looking at the main house now, remembering how it had looked eight years ago. It was still as big and solid as ever, and as out of character here on the prairie as a steer in a ballroom, with its four massive white pillars and its upstairs balcony over the porch. Once it had looked like the master house on some Southern plantation, with lace curtains in the windows and flowers around the four sides. Now it was just a big, empty-windowed mon-

strosity—still useful but as unattractive as a dancehall girl who has outlived her good looks.

Bridger flicked the lines and the buckboard rattled down the last stretch of road, soon rolling to a stop in front of the pillared porch. As Neil was about to step down, the front door opened and his father came out onto the porch, stopping at the top of the broad steps to stare at them coldly.

King Wallace was still a powerful-looking man, his heavy shoulders straining at the seams of the brush jacket he was wearing. There was a touch of gray in what had once been jet-black hair, but he didn't look old. Neil waited for him to smile, but the hardness didn't leave his face.

"Don't stop here," he said bluntly. "You'll be stayin' in the bunkhouse as long as you're around." He started to turn away, then swung around and added, "After you've taken care of your gear, come back here. I want to see you."

Neil had started to get up. Now he settled back on the seat and began to get angry. Then the humor of the situation struck him and he turned to grin at Bridger. "If I'd known how bad he wanted me back," he said dryly, "I would've come a lot sooner."

Bridger didn't appear to see anything funny about it. He wheeled the buckboard over in front of the bunkhouse, and Neil got his warbag out of the back and they both went in together.

Neil looked around at the two rows of bunks, then back at the foreman, who pointed at the farthest one in the left-hand row. "That one ain't being used," he said. "Help yourself." He yawned. "Most of the crew is out on the range. You'll be seeing 'em tomorrow likely."

"Speaking of the crew," Neil said. "Are any of them still here from eight years ago?"

Bridger frowned. "Just one, I guess. Corky Brill still

draws Warbird pay, although he ain't much good any more. I reckon the old man lets him hand on just because he's been here so long."

Neil was pleased that Corky was still around. He remembered when Corky had taught him to shoot a six gun, back when Corky's Peacemaker seemed to weigh a ton. He wondered what Bridger had meant about Corky not being much good any more. Corky shouldn't be very old.

"I'll put your saddle in the barn," Bridger said, leaving the building.

"Thanks." Neil followed him out the door and cut across the yard toward the big house, disliking the prospect of meeting his father and yet somehow eager to see what would happen. He crossed the wide porch and opened the door, wondering grimly if he was expected to pull the bell cord.

His boots echoed on the bare floor of the hallway and he stopped to look around, a little shocked at what had happened. The wide stairs still curved to the upper floor, but every shred of carpet had been torn out and there was no ornament of any kind to soften the effect. Yet everything seemed perfectly clean, as though someone still cared how the place looked.

His father's voice startled him. "Come back here. I'm waiting."

Neil crossed the hallway and went into what had once been called the library. King Wallace was standing uncompromisingly in the center of the room, his hands at his sides, an unlighted cigar in his mouth.

"Shut the door."

Neil closed the door behind him.

"All right, let's get this over with." King took the cigar from his mouth and flipped it toward a cuspidor, not bothering to notice whether it hit the target.

There were several chairs in the room, but King showed no sign of sitting down, so Neil remained standing.

"Your mother wrote me," King said, biting off the words. "She claimed to be dying, so maybe she was telling the truth for once." He shifted his weight irritably. "Damn her soul. She lied to me enough."

Neil stiffened. "If you've brought me in here to listen to your opinion of my mother, it's a waste of time. This trip wasn't my idea in the first place." He started toward the door.

"Hold on." King raised one hand halfway, then let it fall as though he regretted the gesture. "All right, so it wasn't your idea. Well, it wasn't mine, either. I guess you know that. I had a letter from your mother. She said she'd asked you to come back to Warbird."

Neil nodded. "Her letter was mailed after she died. Delight DuBois sent it to where I was working in Kansas."

King frowned. "That's a hell of a name. Who's this DuBois woman?" He made an impatient gesture. "Never mind. Anyway, you got the letter. What did it say?"

"I've got it right here." Neil reached toward his shirt pocket. "You're welcome to read it if you want to."

"No." King's voice was sharp. "I don't want to see it. Just tell me what it says."

"All right. She said she wanted me to come back to Wyoming—that she realized she had done wrong in taking me away when she did, and that she was sorry. She said you had always wanted a son and she'd rest better if she knew she'd sent me back. That's about all, I guess."

The rancher turned and walked over to look out one of the windows for a moment, then came back to the center of the room. "She wrote me pretty much the same thing." His eyes were bitter. "Damn it, she makes me the laughing-

stock of the whole countryside and expects to straighten it all out with a couple of letters." He came a step closer, his eyes probing Neil's.

"I don't reckon you know what kind of hell I went through after you two left. I'd ride down the street in Kingvale—it was Horseshoe Bend then—and hear men laughing behind my back. 'There goes King Wallace,' they'd say. 'Tries to make himself out to be somebody, with that big house and all them cattle, but he can't even hang onto his woman.'" He turned aside and began stomping up and down the room as he talked.

"I showed 'em, by God! There ain't anybody that laughs at me now. The ones that did, they either left the country or they're dead. All that's left is the ones that hate me, and they don't laugh." He stopped pacing and faced Neil again. "There ain't a business in town that I couldn't close if I wanted to, and I've got the law in my pocket. As far as these two-bit ranchers are concerned, I'm about ready for them, too. In another week—" He paused for breath, his face flushed. "By God, boy—"

He shuddered, then went on more calmly. "Well, that ain't what I brought you in here for. What your mother said was right. I *did* want a son, and when you were born it was the happiest day in my life. Then you began to grow up and I could see that you'd be a big man some day, able to take things over when Warbird got too much for me." He looked Neil up and down.

"Even then, eight years ago, you'd started to fill out. I hate a little man, and when you began shootin' up, it made me happy, knowing you'd be tall and tough. Ridin' and ropin' seemed to come natural to you, and Corky told me you seemed to have the feel of a six gun. But then your mother



picked up and left while I was out on roundup, taking you with her. Damn!" He shook his head angrily.

"All right—you're back. From your looks, you've been doing all right, so it's likely you had to give up something to do what your mother asked you to. That being the case, you're welcome to stay so long as you don't try to change me. There may be things I'm doing that you won't be in favor of, but that's my concern. You'll draw top-hand's pay and take orders from Flake Bridger." He frowned. "There's one more thing—you won't have any truck with the two-bit ranchers. They won't have any use for you anyway, but it wouldn't matter if they did. Stay away from 'em."

Neil looked at his father, feeling a little sorry for him and forgetting for a moment that King was being unreasonable, expecting him to hire on as an ordinary puncher. Something else bothered him more than this—something that had to be cleared up here and now. He met his father's eyes squarely.

"About those two-bit ranchers," he said. "Does that include everybody—even Will Turner and the new man, Davenport?"

King nodded. "Everybody. I used to think Will Turner had good sense, but he's as bad as the others. Well, not as bad maybe. He's got guts enough to say to my face what the others say behind my back. I admire a man for that, even if he's wrong, but it won't help him any if he gets in my way." He banged a big fist into his palm. "I tell you, boy, I'm going to run this territory the way I want it run and to hell with anybody that tries to stop me!" He looked up sharply. "Who told you about Davenport? He's new since you left."

Neil was thinking about Will Turner. It seemed impossible that he and King were enemies. He became aware that his father was waiting for an answer and he said ab-

sently, "We happened to be on the same train so we talked some. He seems like a decent sort of man."

"Stay away from him."

Neil shook his head. "You'd better get this straight. I'll see anyone I want to and I'll pick my own friends. If you've got any objections, I can always catch the next train east. Maybe you run this valley but you won't run me."

"Why, you damned—" King Wallace cut off whatever he had been about to say, and turned his head as if listening. He suddenly walked over to the window and looked out. When he turned back, he was loosening the gun in his holster and his eyes were shining.

"You wait here," he said. "We ain't done talking, but I'll be busy for a few minutes." He started toward the hallway as Flake Bridger called from the front door.

"Here they come, boss. They look like they mean business."

"I see 'em." King stomped out into the hall, his boot heels echoing defiantly on the bare boards.

Neil crossed to the window and looked out. Riding down the slope toward Warbird were about a dozen men. They all looked grim, and Will Turner, riding in front, was as grim as the rest, his leathery face a little more seamed than Neil remembered it but otherwise unchanged. Beside Will rode Dutch Shortinghuis, a rancher Neil recalled faintly. One or two other faces looked familiar, including that of Hub Talbert, who was riding a few paces behind the others.

## Chapter Two

FROM THE window, Neil saw Flake Bridger move away from the house and take a position in the middle of the yard. Presently King Wallace joined him, standing a few feet to one side and a little in front. The riders came on at a walk until they were perhaps ten paces away, then stopped at a signal from Will Turner, who looked at King and nodded without smiling.

"I didn't hear you inviting us to dismount, King," he said. There was a trace of humor in Turner's voice.

"My friends are always welcome," King said. "You used to come under that heading. You picked the other side."

Turner nodded slowly. "So be it, then. I still say you did the picking, but that's beside the point. What I've got to say can be said just as well from the saddle."

He took a pipe out of his shirt pocket and reached toward his hip. The two men on the ground watched his hand, but he only took a leather pouch out of his pocket and began tapping tobacco into the bowl of the pipe. It appeared to Neil that he was making an effort to appear casual.

The match flared and Turner sucked the flame into the tobacco. He glanced around at the men behind him. "You know most of these fellers, King," he said. "We're all what you call two-bit ranchers." He smiled. "The same as you were before you got too big for your britches."

Dutch Shortinghuis interrupted impatiently. "Get on with it, Will. We didn't come here to listen to a speech."

Turner frowned at the man a moment, then nodded.

"You're right, Dutch. What I've got to say shouldn't take long. He faced Wallace again.

"You likely know what we're here for. It's about that ditch you've been digging. What do you aim to do with it?"

King let his gaze travel from man to man. Some of them, like Will Turner, met the look without turning aside. Others, such as Hub Talbert, who grinned weakly, couldn't keep from looking away. After his deliberate scrutiny, King looked at their spokesman.

"Seems like you're forgetting something, Will. What I do on Warbird is none of your business, nor anybody else's either. That ought to be clear by now. I reckon the smartest thing you could do would be to turn your horses and ride back the way you came."

One or two of the men at the rear seemed inclined to follow the suggestion, but Will Turner's voice stopped them short. "You can't put us off that easy, King," he said flatly. "There ain't a man of us but knows what you could do with that ditch if you want to. We don't aim to stand by until you've done it, for all you think you own the whole valley."

Neil studied the faces of the men in the group. Some of them showed plainly that they were frightened and ready to call it quits. A few—Turner, Dutch Shortinghuis, and one or two others—showed no signs of panic. He wondered why the Englishman had not come along with them.

Will Turner's words had stung, as Neil could tell from his father's expression. The big rancher's eyes narrowed to slits and there was more color in his cheeks. Neil instinctively let his hand drop to his side, then realized it was a futile gesture since his gun was still in his warbag out in the bunkhouse. He glanced around the room quickly and saw an old Henry on brackets above the fireplace.

"All right, then," King said. "Since you're in such a rush, there's no reason I can't tell you what I'm going to do." He took a step forward. "I'm going to switch San Juan Creek back to the old channel. I need the water over on this side of the hump. Got to have more graze, and grass won't grow without water."

Neil glanced quickly at Flake Bridger. The foreman's lips were twisted into a grin and he seemed to be enjoying the situation. It confirmed Neil's earlier opinion and explained why the men at the depot had stood still under Bridger's insults.

Turner was obviously trying to control his temper, but Dutch Shortinghuis leaned forward in the saddle and began to curse. Nobody else moved; even the air seemed heavy. Neil knew the feeling and he turned and ran quickly toward the fireplace. He yanked the Henry off the brackets and ran back to the window.

There was a little motion now. About half the riders, including Hub Talbert, were drawing aside from Will Turner and those who were backing him up. Even so, it left odds of six to two. All that was needed was for someone to move the wrong muscle and lead would fly. The odd thing was, Neil was more worried about Will than he was about his father. The thought occurred to him as he smashed the muzzle of the Henry through the window glass.

"Keep your hands away from your guns!" he yelled. "You know what this thing can do to a man."

The riders turned startled eyes toward the window, to see the snout of the Henry frowning at them through the broken glass. Neil kept his eyes on Will Turner, who returned the look thoughtfully, with no fear in evidence. Finally Turner shook his head and turned toward Dutch.

"We've ridden into an ambush," he said. "Don't do any-

thing foolish." He made a motion with his hand. "Head for town, men. We'll have to turn this over to the law."

Dutch Shortinghuis swore. "The law!" he said. "That's good! Mulholland does anything King tells him to. You know that."

"You're likely right," Turner admitted. "But we can't do anything else for the moment—not with that gun pointed at us." He met Dutch's angry eyes. "Get moving. I'll be along in a minute."

Shortinghuis hesitated briefly, then swung his horse around and dug his spurs into its flanks. The others followed, all except Will Turner. He kned his mount closer to the house and faced Neil through the window.

"You can put that gun down, Neil. I reckon your pa and Flake Bridger could back-shoot me if I was to make a try for my gun."

Neil lowered the gun, hating the look in Turner's eyes and knowing there was nothing he could say to change it. By interfering as he had, he had put himself on the side of Warbird. No words of his could change Turner's opinion, so he waited silently.

"You got off to a fine start, Neil," Turner went on. "An hour in Horseshoe Bend and you're already siding your pa in his dirty work." He turned and looked back at King Wallace. "No. I ain't forgotten the name on the depot, but it's still Horseshoe Bend as far as I'm concerned. A can of paint don't change things."

King shifted uneasily. "Say your piece and get out, Will. I've got no time for arguing."

Turner didn't appear to hear him, having shifted his attention back to Neil.

"You used to be welcome at our place, Neil. I haven't forgotten how you and Marcia were kids together. In fact, we

talk about you a lot. But you're not welcome now, so don't set foot on Broken Bow." He rubbed his chin. "And don't try to see Marcia. She's not your kind any more, since you've sided with Warbird."

Neil felt a slow anger. He said bluntly, "I hadn't planned on seeing her, Mr. Turner, but you won't stop me by warning me not to. Broken Bow's your property and you can keep me off if you want to, but when it comes to my friends, I'll tell you the same thing I just told my father. I'll do my own choosing there."

Will Turner sat watching him a moment, then turned his horse toward the hill and rode away. Neil put the Henry back on the rack and crossed the hallway. He met his father on the steps.

"You did all right, Neil," the rancher said. "We didn't need your help, but at least you weren't afraid to take a hand. That's something."

"It doesn't take much nerve to throw down on men who aren't expecting it," Neil said. "Besides, I wasn't doing it because you were right—I did it to prevent bloodshed." He looked deliberately at Bridger. "Your foreman there was itching to kill somebody."

Bridger shrugged. "It was them that started it, not me." He grinned crookedly. "Maybe you think I wear this gun for looks."

Neil turned to face his father. "About that water—was Will Turner telling the truth?"

King nodded. "Of course he was. Why?"

"Well, for one thing, you don't need the water. I've been away for quite a while, but I know that much without even checking up. You've got all the water you're going to need for the next fifty years." A new thought crossed his mind,

and he added, "Besides, San Juan Creek isn't even yours. The headwaters are on Stubby Stubblefield's Box-S."

King's lips twisted into a grin. "All right, so I don't need the water. I still want those little ranches. The only way I can get them is by forcing the ranchers to sell at my price, and the only thing that can make them do that is for them to see their land drying up and their cows dying." His grin faded. "Remember, I'm just telling you this because you're a Wallace. It's all in the family."

"Don't count on that too much," Neil said. "You've got no damned business crowding them off the range and you know it. Even if you did have, what gives you the right to divert San Juan Creek when it isn't even on Warbird?"

"You sound like one of them fellers that just left," King said disgustedly. "Hell, you don't think I went into this with my eyes closed. I've got enough of Stubby's notes that I can run him off any time he gets his back up. He's so dumb he thinks I set him up on that ranch out of the goodness of my heart. He ain't got brains enough to see that I had to do it so them other fellers would go ahead and develop their ranches. They figured nothing could go wrong so long as the headwaters belonged to a little guy like themselves." He reached in his pocket for a cigar. "The nice thing about it, it's all perfectly legal."

Neil held back the angry words that rose to his lips. He looked around at the foreman, who was grinning appreciatively, then back at his father. "Some day, he said, 'You're going to overreach yourself. Seems to me I heard something once about a man that gained the whole world but lost his soul. You might—'"

"Oh, hell!" King took the cigar out of his mouth and laughed harshly. "That's the kind of cow dung you'd be bound to hear if you hung around your ma." He jammed the cigar



back into his mouth and lit it, sucking the smoke into his lungs. "I ain't afraid of losing my soul so long as I've got money in the bank." He frowned. "You talk as crazy as Francesca."

"Francesca!" Neil repeated the name in surprise. "You mean she's still here?"

The rancher nodded. "Why wouldn't she be? You don't think I threw her off the place just because my family ran out on me?" He made a motion toward the house. "She's probably in the kitchen. You'd better go in and see her."

"I sure will." Neil took the steps two at a time and cut across the hall, pleasantly excited at the prospect of seeing Francesca again. He crossed the dining room and stepped into the kitchen, calling her name.

She was waiting in the kitchen, a middle-aged woman who was still beautiful. She stood slim and straight, and her eyes were soft with pleasure. Neil said her name again softly and walked slowly to meet her, then bent down to put his arms around her shoulders.

"Neil! My baby!" She took his face between her small hands, her eyes moist. "I'm so glad you're back." Her voice was low and gentle, with very little trace of an accent. "I missed you terribly—it was like losing my own son." She pushed herself away from him, smiling. "I'm talking like a fool. Calling you a baby when you're bigger than your father."

Neil grinned down at her. "Call me anything you want to, Francesca. I've missed you, too. Mother and I used to talk about you all the time."

Her smile faded. "King tells me your mother's dead, Neil. I'm sorry." She reached up to straighten a lock of hair. "Your mother was a delicate woman—too delicate for a place like this."

Neil nodded soberly. "She was soft, but she wouldn't change. I guess that's what caused the trouble. Neither of them would give in." He smiled. "Come on, this isn't any time to be gloomy. I couldn't believe it when my father said you were still here." He looked around the room. "What happened to all the nice things you used to have?"

"King made me take them all out of the house as soon as he came in from that roundup." Francesca shook her head. "I suppose he didn't want anything around to remind him of Lucinda." She lowered her voice. "He doesn't know it, but everything is packed away in the attic. He was too proud to ask me what I did with them."

Neil walked around the kitchen, recalling old memories. Something was simmering on the stove and he lifted the lid. "Chile," he said, grinning. "You always did make the best chile I ever tasted. I used to try to get it back East, but it never tasted right."

She laughed. "Maybe you have to be a Mexican to make it right, Neil."

She sounded a little bitter, and he looked at her quickly.

"Don't mind me, Neil," she said. "I'm used to it now. I used to think, except for your mother's being alive—"

It was a new line of thought, and Neil looked at Francesca curiously. Evidently she had been more than a housekeeper, had stayed at Warbird because she wasn't willing to leave King Wallace. And now that he was free, King was not going to do anything about it. Knowing King, it was easy to understand. He probably considered Francesca beneath him because she was a Mexican. The thought angered him. Francesca was good enough for any man—far too good for his father.

"I still have my little room over the kitchen," Francesca said. "I managed to keep it the way it was."

She crossed the room with short quick steps and opened the door to the back stairway. Neil followed her up the stairs and looked into the little room with its starched white curtains and one corner arranged like a little shrine. She saw the direction of his glance and said quietly, "I've prayed for you every night, Neil—prayed that you'd be all right."

Heavy steps sounded from below, and they went back down to the kitchen. King was in the dining room doorway, a questioning look on his face. He took a cigar from between his lips.

"I'm going to town," he said. "I've got to show them ranchers that we ain't being buffaloed with that talk about the law. I want you to come along."

When Neil hesitated, King went on meaningly, "You'd better. If you don't, they'll think you're scared. You wouldn't want them to think that, now would you?"

Neil heard Francesca suck in her breath. "No," he said. "I wouldn't want them to think that." He turned his back on the dining room, listening to his father's retreating steps. He took Francesca's hand.

"You ought to get away from here, Francesca. There's going to be nothing but trouble around Warbird. I'll find a place for you where you'll be safe."

She patted his hand softly. "No, Neil. I won't leave Warbird, but it was good of you to think about it." She released his hand, and looked up at him seriously. "About your father and me, Neil. All I've done is wait. I haven't—" She seemed to change her mind and said quickly, "You'd better go. Your father doesn't like to be kept waiting."

He grinned. "That's twice I've been told that in the last hour or two. Some day my father's going to have to learn to do a lot of things he doesn't like to." He turned and

crossed the kitchen, went through the dining room. His father was waiting impatiently in the hallway.

"On second thought," King said, "you'd better move your gear into your old room. I wouldn't want the crew thinking you were out there to spy on 'em."

Neil was tempted to refuse, but King had worded it in such a way that he had little choice. Besides, he told himself, his presence in the house might make things pleasanter for Francesca. "I'll do it when we get back," he said.

King looked at him. "All right, then, but you've got to get your gun. You ain't going to Kingvale unarmed." He shifted restlessly. "Hurry it up. They'll think I can't make up my mind."

Neil gave him a long look, then cut across toward the bunkhouse. A saddled horse was tied to the iron ring and Neil recognized his own saddle. The horse was a beautiful sorrel, but Neil was irritated. His father's high-handed way of doing things was hard to stomach. Like ordering a horse saddled before even giving you a chance to say yes or no.

He entered the bunkhouse and got his gun and belt out of his warbag. When he went out, his father was already mounted on a big black stallion. Before Neil was in the saddle, the rancher had ridden out of the ranch yard. Neil followed him, not liking it at all.

## Chapter Three

IT WAS THE first time Neil had been inside Frank Diamond's saloon, but he remembered seeing the owner on the street years before. Diamond was a heavy-set man who had drifted West after the war, and decided to stay. He was talking to a couple of men at the bar when Neil and his father entered, but he quickly left the men and moved over to extend his hand across the bar.

"Howdy, Mr. Wallace," he said respectfully. "Ain't seen you for quite a while."

King shook his hand perfunctorily. "I don't find much time for hanging around town," he said, looking meaningly at the other men at the bar. He jerked his head toward Neil. "You may remember my boy. He's been away awhile."

Diamond reached for Neil's hand. "You've changed considerable, Neil. Welcome back."

Neil shook the man's hand. "Wyoming's changed too, or so it seems after Kansas. The mountains look a lot higher than they used to."

"You've been in Kansas?" The saloonman grinned. "Now there's a place you can have, far as I'm concerned. I came through there back in sixty-seven and I'm still spitting dust."

Neil took off his hat and blew on it, sending up a gray cloud. "Wyoming ain't too awful damp," he said dryly. "Or maybe you'd noticed."

Diamond grinned. "I've got the answer to that, and it comes in a bottle. What'll you gentlemen have?"

King glanced at Neil, then back at Diamond. "You know my preference. Make it two." He turned to face the two men

at the other end of the bar, who were watching the scene without blinking. "You fellers want to say anything?"

The two men exchanged glances. One of them shook his head and started away, leaving his drink unfinished. The other, apparently a little bolder, picked up his glass and drained it deliberately, then set it on the bar.

"Why no," he said. "Nothing to you, anyway. You wouldn't listen if I did." He turned and stalked out of the saloon.

King cursed. "What's that man's name?"

"Him?" Frank Diamond scratched his jaw. "Some puncher passin' through, most likely. Never saw him before." He set two glasses on the bar, filled them from a bottle which he took out of a cupboard, then left the bottle sitting beside the glasses.

King stared across the bar. "You know that ain't true, Frank. Only a man that knew me would answer the way he did." He frowned. "You ain't forgetting whose side you're on, are you?"

The saloonkeeper shook his head. "You know me better than that, Mr. Wallace. I know who owns this town and I ain't aiming to go out of business." He began to polish the bar. "All right. His name's Suggs and he rides for Dutch Shortinghuis. I was just tryin' to avoid trouble."

King picked up the whiskey bottle and hurled it across the bar. It crashed against the mirror, shattering it. "I hate being lied to," he said. "Next time maybe you'll remember that." He turned to Neil. "Drink up, boy. We want to get across the street to the café before they run out of grub."

Neil looked at Diamond, who was standing tight-lipped, his cheeks drained of color. He waited for the man to protest, but the saloonkeeper's mouth didn't open. It was more than Neil could grasp, and he felt a tightness in his stomach muscles. He looked at his father, who had turned his back

to the bar and was drinking his liquor as though he'd already forgotten the incident.

Neil pushed his glass away from him. "I'm not thirsty," he said.

King looked at him with contempt and reached for a coin, which he tossed on the counter. He turned and stomped toward the door.

Neil looked at the saloonkeeper again, feeling that there was something he should say, but Diamond's eyes were so hard that he turned away without speaking. He followed King toward the batwings, half expecting a blast of buckshot in his back. He pushed his way through the swinging doors and took a deep breath of fresh air.

His father was halfway across the street, headed for the café. As Neil walked over to join him, his eye was caught by a flash of color and he turned to see a girl going into the mercantile store next door to the café. The girl turned and glanced back through the little show window, and Neil stopped in mid-stride. He'd never expected to find her here—the girl he'd always dreamed of meeting. It was unbelievable, but he'd seen her in imagination many times during the last few years. Now he was looking at her in the flesh.

"Hurry, damn it!" King beckoned from the front of the café.

The girl moved out of sight at that moment, and Neil shook his head and headed for the café. He saw his father watching him speculatively.

"I just saw somebody I want to talk to," he said. "You go ahead and eat if you're in a hurry."

King frowned. "You mean that girl in the yellow dress? That's Will Turner's kid. You don't want to see her. Come on. It's 'way past noon and I'm hungry."

"You mean that was Marcia? But Marcia was a scrawny

little towhead. She couldn't have changed that much. Besides, if it had been Marcia, she would've stopped. I'm going to find out for myself." He turned toward the store.

King grabbed his arm. "Don't make a fool of yourself, Neil. She's no friend of yours. I'll guarantee she won't speak to you if you do follow her in there."

Neil hesitated. He remembered what Will Turner had told him only this morning. If Will's opinion of him could change that suddenly, there was no reason to think that Marcia couldn't have formed an equally quick judgment. By now, she would have heard of the episode at Warbird, and loyalty to her father, if nothing else, would prevent her from being friendly. He turned reluctantly toward the café.

"Don't take it so hard," his father said. "There's plenty of women to go around without gettin' stirred up about the daughter of a damned shoestring cowman." He pushed through the doorway and Neil followed.

The café was almost empty, and Neil saw by the clock that it was half past one. A Chinaman came out of the kitchen, saw who had come in, and grinned broadly. He bowed and motioned them to a table. King sat down without speaking, and the Chinese looked at Neil questioningly.

"Steak and potatoes," Neil said. "Rare."

The Chinese bowed again and scuttled into the kitchen. Neil took off his hat and laid it on an extra chair, noticing that his father hadn't bothered to remove his black Stetson. The only other customer in the place got up and left, picking his teeth with a penknife. Neil turned his attention to King, who was watching him.

"Maybe I'm a little behind the times. If I'd just smashed a man's hundred-dollar mirror, I'd act like something had happened. You seem to have forgotten it already.



King laughed. "Hell. I'll pay him for it some day, after he's had a chance to tell everyone what's happened." He lowered his voice. "Damn it, you've got to throw the fear of God into these dumb tinhorns if you want 'em to respect you. I found that out a long time ago."

Neil shook his head. "You just found out *one* way. It's also possible to get their respect by treating them like your equals." He saw the antagonism building in his father's eyes, but he went on. "All you're going to end up with this way is a bunch of enemies. One of these days somebody you've stepped on is liable to kill you."

"They'd like to," King agreed. "That's why I never travel alone. Maybe you thought it was funny for Flake Bridger to be around the ranch house today instead of out with his crew. Hell, I knew them ranchers would be out pretty quick. That's why I was ready for 'em." He picked up his knife and looked at it thoughtfully. "Of course, now that I've got you to side me, Flake can spend more time with the other hands."

"Don't figure on me to pull you out of a jam," Neil said. "I didn't come back here to be your bodyguard. I already told you that when I took a hand this morning."

King leaned forward angrily. "All right. You ain't all Wallace. From now on I'll figure you're a weak crutch." He banged his fist on the table. "I'll handle my own fights. Just see to it you don't get in my way!"

The Chinese came out of the kitchen and set their diners in front of them, and they finished the meal without further conversation. By the time they were through, Neil had reached a decision. He could do no good here in Wyoming. Actually, all he'd promised was to come back—not to stay. He'd go back to Kansas and pick up where he'd left off. If Francesca wouldn't leave Warbird, he'd find

some other way of helping her out. Oddly, the main thing that bothered him about leaving was that he wouldn't have a chance to talk to Marcia and her father—to explain that he wasn't as bad as they seemed to think.

With this settled, he followed King out of the café feeling a good deal better. As he stepped out onto the board sidewalk, he saw that his father had stopped suddenly and was watching a man walking toward them. It took a second for Neil to recognize the man as Dutch Shortinghuis, but it took no longer than that to see that the Dutchman was looking for trouble.

Shortinghuis planted himself solidly on both feet facing the rancher. He had a six gun holstered at his waist and his thumbs were hooked in his belt. His broad face was beet-red and he was breathing rapidly. He licked his lips.

"They said you was in town, Wallace," he said, his accent exaggerated by emotion. "I've got something I want to tell you." He flicked his eyes past King and looked sourly at Neil. "I see you've got your kid to back you up."

"Don't worry about Neil," King said. "He loves everybody." If King was afraid, it didn't show in his voice. Neil had to acknowledge a certain admiration for King's coldness, in spite of his father's insulting inference.

Dutch turned his malevolent look back at the rancher.

"Will Turner thinks the law's going to stop you, but I don't believe it. What I've got to tell you is that if nobody else will, I'll stop you myself. I guess your hide ain't bullet-proof any more than anyone else's." He took a step forward and added savagely, "I've got a woman and three kids, and they ain't going to starve just because you think you're Gott Almighty. Before that happens, I'll—"

A man had come out of the saloon across the street, and Neil had noticed him out of the corner of his eye. Suddenly

the man said bluntly, "Let it ride right there, Dutch. I've got you covered."

Neil turned quickly to watch the newcomer, who was starting toward them. Actually, his gun was still in his holster and he was making no motion to draw, but Dutch's shoulders sagged and his hand fell away from his gun. Neil noticed now that the stranger wore a star. The lawman walked up behind Dutch, lifted Dutch's gun out of the holster, and shoved it inside his own waistband.

Neil looked at his father, expecting to see some sign of relief, but King wore his customary frown. "You had no call to butt in, Mulholland," he said. "I'm still able to handle my own fights." He shifted his shoulders irritably.

The man called Mulholland glanced at Neil, and the corners of his mouth dropped. "I've still got my job to do, Mr. Wallace," he said. "There's an ordinance against gun-fighting and I aim to enforce it."

King snorted derisively. "Who the hell made that ordinance, Mulholland? I did. I guess that gives me the right to break it if I want to. If it doesn't, I can make another one to suit my needs. Or get a marshal that knows his business."

The marshal's neck reddened, and Neil felt a pang of sympathy for him as the lawman looked uncertainly at Shortinghuis.

Dutch spat in the dust. "Ask *him* what to do next, marshal," he said, pointing to the rancher. "Everybody knows you're on his payroll."

"None of that," the marshal said sharply. "I know what to do all right. I'll let you cool your heels in jail." He reached out to take the man's wrist, but King Wallace's voice stopped him short.

"Turn him loose, Cal. He ain't going to do any harm. His kind's too scared to try."

The marshal looked at the ground for a moment, then said flatly, "All right, Dutch. Beat it."

"Why sure, marshal." Dutch turned and walked away without even looking back.

"This is Cal Mulholland," King said belatedly. "Marshal, this is my boy, Neil. He left here before you hit town."

"Glad to meet you," the marshal said listlessly. Neil noticed that Cal Mulholland had a habit of looking at the ground.

King brushed past them. "All right. Let's head for Warbird. I want to see how my ditch is coming."

They swung into their saddles. As they rode past the depot, a man came out of the little building, holding a piece of paper. He looked at them and frowned, then looked at the paper.

"This here is for *Neil Wallace*," he said. "Is it yours?"

King nudged his stallion over to where the man was standing and reached for the paper, but Neil bumped him away and took it out of the man's hand.

"I guess you didn't notice," he said to his father. "The name was Neil."

King glared at him savagely. "All right," he said. "You don't have to make a big deal out of it. Just open it up." He shrugged. "I was only going to hand it to you."

"Sure." Neil looked down at the paper, expecting it to be from his boss in Kansas. As he read the message, he frowned. He read it again, then handed it to his father.

King scowled as he read the telegram. He looked around sharply. "Delight DuBois," he said. "She's the woman that sent you your mother's letter. What the hell right has she got to follow you to Wyoming?"

Neil reached for the telegram and put it in his shirt pocket. Actually he was almost as surprised as his father had been.

Of course he had said a good many things to Delight, because Delight was the kind of girl who made a man feel like talking. Especially a man who had seen mostly cattle for a year. Besides, it had been Christmas time, and Christmas at his mother's had been a festive occasion, with lots of music and soft lights.

He noticed that the telegrapher was still watching him him curiously, so he touched the horse with his spurs and headed down the road, his father riding beside him, waiting impatiently for his answer.

When the telegrapher was out of hearing, Neil turned in his saddle. "I met her in St. Louis last Christmas," he said. "Mother had written me to come back; I guess she knew she didn't have long to live. Delight Dubois is a girl Mother knew. They seemed to be very friendly in spite of the difference in age." He grinned wryly. "She took quite a shine to me, probably because I was different from the other men in that crowd. I guess I talked too much. You'll know why when you meet her. Anyway, I seem to remember bragging a good deal about Warbird. I even told her she ought to see it to know what I meant, and that I'd invite her out, only I didn't live there any more."

King grunted moodily. "All right, so you had a little fun. That still don't mean you had any business inviting a girl to visit you. She'll just have to get on the next train and go back."

Neil had felt a little guilty at first, but his guilty feeling now changed to anger. He thought about it while they rode perhaps half a mile, then said bluntly, "I can't send her back, not after she's already on the way. I admit I shouldn't have suggested it in the first place, but it's too late to change that now. I won't embarrass her by making

her stay in the hotel, either. She's not the kind of girl you treat that way."

"The hell she ain't!" King gestured savagely. "They're all alike except that some of 'em know how to do more with what they've got. This one ain't any different from the rest. She's going back to wherever she's from, and that's settled."

Neil pulled up on the reins. "All right—she goes back, but I'll be on the same train. I told you once already and I'll tell you once more—you're not going to run me like you do the others. I came back here all set to give it a fair try, thinking maybe what I'd heard about you was exaggerated. Now I've found out for myself and I can understand why my mother couldn't take any more." His temper was getting the best of him, and he added harshly, "They'll *really* laugh at you now, when your own son can't even put up with your high-handed ways."

"Wait!" King's jaw muscles were working spasmodically. "Damn it, you know you've got my tail in a crack. All right, then, I'll make you a deal. I'll let the girl come to Warbird and I'll act like she's welcome, but you've got to do something too. You've got to stick by me in the fight with the two-bitters."

Neil had already begun to regret his outburst, and his father's obvious distress bothered him. Besides, the proposition seemed reasonable. Even a hired hand stood by his employer.

He nodded. "It's a deal, then, but there's a couple of things I want understood. For one thing, you're going to let Francesca fix up the house so it looks nice again."

King nodded. "All right. What else?"

"Just this. I won't fight Will Turner. I draw the line there."

King nodded, a strange light in his eyes. "Then it's settled."

He cursed. "A fine thing when a man has to make deals with his own son." His mood seemed to lift. "As for Will Turner, I reckon it's that girl of his you're thinking about. If so, you're just a plain fool. She's got no use for you now and she'll have even less when she finds out about this DuBois woman."

"I'll worry about that," Neil said, and he realized he was already worrying.

## Chapter Four

IT WAS King Wallace's nature to lash out at anything that got in his way, but experience had taught him that there were times when it was smart to stall for time. It was this acquired caution which had kept him from trying to force Neil to send Delight DuBois back to St. Louis on the first train. The last thing Warbird needed was another woman like Lucinda on the place, particularly if she had any personal interest in Neil, and it stood to reason that Delight did, or she wouldn't be making this trip. However, there were ways of getting rid of the woman without driving his son away for good. Buying her off, for one. If that failed, something else could be arranged.

King glanced over his shoulder and saw Neil jogging along behind, a calm man, but with the look of one who could be dangerous if aroused. King frowned. God! If only Lucinda hadn't taken him away just when he was beginning to grow up. What a son he would have made! Well, it

wasn't too late. Once Neil saw things the way they really were, he'd soon enough decide which side he was on. In the meantime, the important thing was to make sure that he stayed around.

They reached the little plateau from which the road wound down into Warbird's home ranch, and King reined up, waiting for Neil to draw alongside. He made a conscious effort to speak pleasantly as he nodded toward the rolling hills beyond.

"In spite of our differences, boy, I guess you'll agree that I've built a good spread here. You didn't see anything like this in Kansas."

Neil let his glance travel across the expanse of grass. "No," he said. "Nothing this big."

Something about the answer irritated King, and he knew it would show in his face, so he turned and gigged the black into motion. When they reached the ranch yard, he said stiffly, "I'm going up to the ditch. You'd better tell Francesca about that woman, and get your stuff up to your room." He couldn't help adding, "Maybe you'll want to give Francesca a hand with the carpets or something. There's no one else around the place except the cook, and he wouldn't mess around at housework."

It was intended as an insult, but he saw that Neil was grinning and he knew that he had spoken unwisely. Anger made him jab his spurs into the black's flanks, and the big animal broke into a headlong gallop, with King leaning low over the pommel, shouting curses that no one else could hear. When the horse began to tire, he forced it into another burst of speed, and this act in itself did something to settle his nerves. He finally let the horse drop into a trot, and soon came in sight of San Juan Creek, which meant that he was on Box-S land.



Seeing the creek put his mind back on the ditch, and he began to grin. Another week or so and he'd show who was boss around here. Let the ranchers cry their eyes out if they wanted to. They couldn't water their cattle with tears, and their screams wouldn't turn the water back into the creek bed.

He lifted the black into a trot and climbed the little ridge that cut off his view of the ditch. As he did so, he heard the sound of a gun and he cocked his head, frowning. Was it possible that the Dutchman had actually had guts enough to put up a fight?

He reached the top of the rise and reined to a halt. Below him, half a mile away, was the ditch. Close to the ditch, Flake Bridger and another man were standing a few feet apart, looking at a third man who was lying on the ground, flat on his back. Flake was merely watching, but the other man who was on his feet had a gun in his hand. He raised it now, aiming it toward the man on the ground. As he did so, Flake glanced up toward King, and his lips moved.

The other man lowered his gun and looked around. King recognized him then as Ace Pollock. Both of them turned to watch him ride down the hill. By then, King recognized the man on the ground. It was Corky Brill.

"Let's have it. What's going on?" King kept his eyes on Ace Pollock, not because he expected trouble but because Ace still had a gun in his hand, and King had a good deal of respect for a gun, particularly in the hand of a man like Ace.

Ace shrugged and holstered his Colt. He slanted a glance at Flake Bridger, who was grinning, then turned back toward King, ignoring Corky, who was pressing his hand against a spreading stain high up on his leg.

"Hell, boss," Ace said. "A man can just stand so much.

This runt"—he indicated Corky—"all he's done has been get in the way ever since we started diggin' the ditch. There ain't no reason a man should act that way, not unless he's getting paid for it. I told him so, and he went for his gun."

King looked at the wounded man, who was staring stonily at his accuser. He turned to the foreman. "How about it, Flake? Did you see what happened?"

The foreman quit smiling. "Sure. I seen it, King. It's like Ace said. You know how Brill's been actin' since you made me ramrod. I reckon he figures if he can slow things up it'll make me look bad." He turned to Ace Pollock. "You had no business going for your gun, Ace. This could've been settled without that."

Ace spat. "By God, if a man starts to draw, I ain't going to stand here and wait for somebody to talk him out of it. You would've done the same thing."

Flake shrugged. "I guess I would," he admitted.

King looked down at Corky. "How about it, Brill? What's your side of the story?"

The puncher looked up and grinned sourly. "What difference does it make? Your two killers already told you theirs. You ain't going to pay any attention to anything I say." He tried to get up, and let out a groan.

Several other punchers came riding up. King beckoned to them. "One of you men borrow a wagon from Stubby. We've got to get this man patched up before he bleeds to death."

"I'll go." The man who answered was Duane Forbush. He grinned down at the wounded man. "You just take it easy, Corky. Don't forget you owe me five dollars from last payday."

Corky attempted a grin. "If you aim to collect, quit

yappin' about it and get that wagon. I'm liable to go on without you."

Duane whirled his horse away and galloped off. King pointed at one of the other riders. "You, Phillips, stay with Brill until Duane gets here with the wagon. Then send him back to Warbird. Francesca can do him more good than that sawbones in Kingvale." He touched spurs to his black, calling over his shoulder, "Flake, you and Pollock come with me. I'm taking a look at the dam."

There was no doubt in King's mind that Corky Brill had objected to the work they were doing. Corky didn't see things the way they were any more than Neil did. It was this failing which had cost Corky his job as ramrod of Warbird, reducing him to the status of cowhand. But it was equally clear to King that Corky hadn't reached for his gun. The man was no fool and only a fool would go up against a gunslinger like Ace Pollock. Only a fool or a man like Flake Bridger, who would have more than a fifty-fifty chance of outdrawing him. Besides, even if Corky *had* attempted to draw, that wouldn't account for the way Ace had thrown down on him after he was flat on his back. That had been deliberate.

He cursed under his breath. That was the trouble with having a bunch of hardcases on your crew. You had to have them, with a fight shaping up, but it didn't make you sleep any easier.

He reached the dam, where three mounted men were dragging rocks with their ropes, placing them where they could easily be pushed into position. As he reined up, Flake Bridger drew alongside.

"It's comin' along," Bridger said. "Another few days and we'll be all set to close the gap." He pointed at the two piles

of rocks which had already narrowed the creek bed, channeling the water into a deep passageway.

King studied the situation without answering. It had been his own idea, conceived many years before, this scheme to dam up New San Juan Creek and turn the water into a ditch that would lead it back into the old creek bed. Now that the plan was almost ready to go into operation, he was seething with impatience.

He urged his horse to the edge of the ditch and looked along it to where it angled off to the northeast. Only a small neck of land remained in place, enough to keep the water from trickling into the dry gully. This narrow strip of dirt could be blown out with one charge of dynamite. Then the rest of the rocks could be pushed into the gap in the dam, and it would be done. Except for the fight that was sure to follow.

He rode back to level ground, feeling well pleased, and motioned for Flake Bridger to follow him. When they were out of earshot of the others, he pulled up and reached for a cigar.

"Like you said, it's comin' along. Another few days, and we can plug her up." He spat out the end of the cigar. "You ain't seen anybody snoopin' around?"

Flake shook his head. "I ain't liable to, with most of the crew here every day and all of 'em wearin' their hoglegs." He looked at King seriously. "What do you think about Stubblefield? Is there any danger he'll get proddy?"

"Stubby?" King thought about it a moment, then shook his head. "You don't have to worry about him. If it wasn't for me, he'd still be punchin' cows." He grinned. "Hell! He thinks I'm his fairy godmother. By the time he finds out different, none of the ranchers would believe him even if he did try to explain." A thought which had been troubling him

came into his mind again and he looked at Bridger speculatively.

"You haven't said anything about the kid being back from St. Louis. Does it bother you any?"

Bridger met his eyes squarely and shook his head. "I think it's fine. With the whole valley against us, we're going to need all the help we can get. Besides, it's good for you to have family around." He grinned. "The boy might turn into a regular hellcat once he realizes he's back in Wyoming."

King shook his head. "He ain't making much of a start in that direction. Well, I just wanted your ideas." He looked past Bridger. "Here comes Stubby's wagon. Looks like Stubby's coming along too."

He put his horse into motion, angling down to intercept the wagon, hiding his annoyance. It didn't bother him too much that Bridger would lie to him, but it irritated him that the foreman expected him to believe the lies. Hell, Bridger had been as sore as a bee-stung pup ever since Neil had written that he was coming. Likely Bridger had some damfool idea of getting a hunk of Warbird himself some day and figured that Neil would keep him from it. But there was nothing to do but pretend to fall for Bridger's bluff. Without Bridger's reputation, Warbird would be due for some tough sledding when the ranchers got up on their haunches.

He reached Corky Brill at the same time as the wagon. "You didn't have to come along," he said to Stubblefield. "You're likely busy."

Stubblefield said something to Corky, then rode over to King. He was a short, squat man with a broad face which was now knotted into a frown. "It didn't matter," he said.

"There ain't much doing right now. Besides, I been wanting to talk to you."

"Sure." King offered him a cigar, which he accepted and put carefully in his shirt pocket. "What's on your mind, Stubby?"

The little man looked worriedly toward the ditch. "This irrigation business," he said. "Some of the fellers are afraid you're going to shut off all their water. That ain't a fact, is it?"

King forced a grin. "You ought to know me better than that, Stubby. Do you suppose I would've sold you this land if I wanted to be a hog? Hell, all I aim to do is throw part of the water onto my land when there's too much in the creek anyway." He pointed toward the dam. "That's why we're leaving the gap in the rocks. Soon as the water drops, I'll put in a gate so we can open it or shut it. I've already sent for the gate. Had to order it from Chicago."

The little man's frown faded and he tugged at his ear. "That's what I thought, but a feller gets to hearing things." He looked at King solemnly. "I didn't mean no harm."

King leaned over and tapped him on the shoulder. "Forget it." He reached in his pocket and took out another cigar. "Here. Smoke this one. You can save the other."

"Thanks." Stubby looked at the cigar rather sheepishly, then carefully cut off the tip, which he dropped in the pocket of his shirt. He inserted the cigar between his lips and rolled it around appreciatively before lighting it.

King turned away hurriedly, afraid that Stubby would read the contempt in his eyes. Stubby was a small man in more ways than one, and smallness, to King's mind, was the worst vice a man could have. When he was sure that Stubby couldn't see him, he took out the rest of the cigars and deliberately twisted them in two, throwing the fragments on

the ground. It gave him a peculiar satisfaction, like breaking Frank Diamond's mirror.

He turned around to see Flake Bridger watching him. The foreman was studying him curiously, and King swung his horse around toward Warbird and kicked it into a trot. Behind him, he heard Duane Forbush say good-naturedly, "You ain't going to cash in yet, Corky. Not till I get my five dollars. I'll take it real slow and easy."

"You go to hell," the wounded man said without rancor.

King reached the first rise and stopped to look back. Flake Bridger and Ace Pollock were sitting their horses and talking. They seemed to be laughing, although he couldn't be sure from this distance. Well, it didn't matter. Once the little ranchers were disposed of, there'd be no more need for either of them. Especially if Neil stayed on and got rid of some of his crazy ideas.

Thinking of Neil, King's mind went back to their last conversation. What sort of woman was it who would follow a man halfway across the country, breathing the soot and dust that such a trip involved, and sitting up night after night on a hard plush seat? Well, one woman who might do it was the kind who would fit into Wyoming's rugged life. But this friend of Neil's—this Delight DuBois—it was a cinch she wouldn't meet that description. She had a different game. She was after money. Otherwise, why did she wait until Neil was back on Warbird and then come so quickly that there was no chance of stopping her?

He reached for a cigar, and cursed himself for the sudden impulse which had made him throw them all away.

Well, whatever her game, she wouldn't find things as easy as she seemed to think. Of course, if Neil had given her any legitimate excuse to make demands—if she was in a family way or something—well, that might make it a

little more expensive. But he doubted if Neil had given her that much right to make any claims on him. Likely Neil was a perfect gentleman where women were concerned. And even if he wasn't—well, Francesca had never made *him* marry *her*.

King swore savagely. Why was it that women made such a big fuss about getting married? He and Francesca had hit it off all right without standing up in front of any long-faced parson. Until word had come of Lucinda's death, that was. Since then, Francesca had seemed different, acting like she was expecting him to do something about it and not having anything more to do with him unless he married her.

He shook his head. It looked as if women were his worst enemies. First, there was Lucinda, then Francesca beginning to mope around, and now this French girl with the incredible name. Well, he was rid of one of them. He'd figure a way to get the others off his neck.

He reined up, debated for a moment, then swung the black over toward the north. Warbird was no place to head for right now, with Francesca tearing the house to pieces and a wounded man being brought in. He'd ride along Dry Creek and make sure it wasn't blocked anywhere.

A nagging thought took hold of him. He should have told Bridger to post guards at the dam nights now. If Stubby had heard talk, it might mean that someone would try to slow down his project. He considered riding back, but decided against it. None of the ranchers would be smart enough to think of it, unless it was Will Turner or Hub Talbert. Will was too civilized to do anything about it, preferring to leave it to the law. As for Hub Talbert, he didn't have the guts to kill a chicken unless he could talk it to death. He dismissed it from his mind but found it a



good deal harder to dispose of the woman, Delight DuBois. Some instinct told him she was liable to cause trouble.

A few hundred miles to the east, the object of King's worries was jouncing uncomfortably, having given up any hope of outguessing the bumps and curves which made riding in the dirty railway coach almost unbearable. It was Delight's first venture west of the Mississippi, and she wondered at times if she had been a fool to make the trip.

Still, she couldn't very well have stayed longer in St. Louis—her affair with the banker was getting out of hand. Nor had the trip been entirely boring, thanks to the coincidence that a male acquaintance had been on the train as far as Kearney. Remembering his impassioned pleading that she get off when he did, she smiled. Men were such fools. A clever woman, if she were pretty enough, could do anything she pleased with any of them. Even marry them if she wanted to.

Take Neil Wallace, for example. He was a big, virile man, one at whom other men looked with respect, yet he had been taken in as easily as any schoolboy, never suspecting that she considered him just an interesting change from the barbered, flabbily-muscled men who could usually be found around Lucinda Wallace's home of an evening. The poor sap! He thought she was an innocent, a delicate flower to be handled with kid gloves.

The train lurched, and Delight swore under her breath, careful not to let any of the other passengers hear. She wasn't going to risk everything now.

## Chapter Five

AFTER KING rode angrily away from the ranch house, Neil walked the sorrel over to the big horse barn and fed and rubbed down the animal. As he left the barn he glanced up at the weather-beaten coyote pelt tacked to the front of the building, remembering the day he had brought it home so proudly—the first animal he ever shot with a man-size gun, the Navy Colt his father had given him on his fourteenth birthday. He also remembered his regret afterward, when the excitement had worn off and he had realized that there had been no reason for shooting the coyote.

Some of the regret still remained, although he had shot many predators since that day, not all of them four-legged. He glanced down at the gun, the same Colt, worn now because King Wallace had told him to, because some of the hate the ranchers felt for King had already begun to run off on him as well. Moved by a sudden impulse, he reached up and yanked the pelt loose from the barn, pulling the rusty nails with it. He rolled it into a ball and carried it with him to the bunkhouse, shoving it under the raised floor and pushing it out of sight with the toe of his boot.

He heard his name spoken then, and turned to see that Francesca was watching him from the porch of the big house, an understanding expression in her eyes. He shook off his somber mood and strode across to face her from the foot of the steps.

"You always wanted to do that, didn't you, Neil?" Her voice was soft, melodious as only a Mexican's voice can be. "You never liked to kill. I noticed that years ago."

Neil hesitated, surprised that she knew him so well. As he was about to answer, she said gently, "You can't tear down the past, Neil. It's still there, just like that coyote." She pointed toward the barn, and he turned to see the shape of the coyote skin still discernible where the leather had protected the wood from weathering. He looked back at Francesca.

"I suppose you're right, but it'll fade in time." He shook his head, strangely depressed. "I wish I didn't have anything more serious to remember than a dead coyote." He was thinking of a man in Dodge City. "I wish—" He saw her expression, and left the thought unspoken. "Shucks. What're we getting so mournful about? I've got some good news for you."

Her smile returned, but she looked dubious. "Good news on Warbird? Except for your letter, I've heard nothing but trouble since you and your mother went away." She made a little gesture with her hands. "Come out of the sun and tell me what this good news is."

He climbed the steps, reaching for his telegram. She read it with painstaking concentration. It occurred to him that she might not look with favor on the announcement of Delight's arrival, but she smiled and said pleasantly, "Who is this girl, Neil?" and before he could answer, "Are you in love with her?"

"I don't know," he said, answering the second question. "She's a mighty pretty girl, but I never thought about her that way." He grinned. "She was a friend of Mother's. You know, she must be pretty nice to suit Mother's fancy." He watched her nod thoughtfully, and added, "But that isn't all the good news. We're going to fix up this house the way it used to be. I'll help you, right now, this afternoon."

Her eyes lighted up instantly, but she hesitated. "Does

your father know about this? Will he be angry when he finds things changed?"

"He knows, all right." Neil laughed. "Come on. I want to get things started before he changes his mind."

"Don't worry about King Wallace changing his mind," Francesca said. "He never changes about anything." She frowned suddenly, as though an unexpected thought had bothered her, then smiled again and took his arm. "Come on. The stuff is all in good shape. I'll help you carry it."

Neil was vaguely puzzled by her sudden frown, but he forgot about it as he got busy dragging rugs and curtains out of the attic, and placing them where Francesca directed. As the house began to regain some of its former appearance, Francesca seemed to grow younger, her eyes sparkling as she fluttered about, directing the transformation. Finally she dropped into a chair and smiled at Neil a little ruefully.

"Maybe I'm not a young girl any more," she said. "I'm beginning to run out of breath." She looked up at him. "Besides, we've done enough here on the main floor. The upstairs can wait until tomorrow."

Neil looked around at the changed appearance of the house. He gestured toward King's office. "How about in there? Don't you want to finish that, too?"

"His office?" Francesca shook her head. "Your father would kill me if I touched anything of his." She got to her feet quickly, cocking her head. "Someone's coming down the hill, and I'm a sight." She hurried out into the hall and peered through the window. "It's Duane Forbush driving, but that isn't a Warbird wagon. It needs painting." She turned quickly, her expression so anxious that Neil hurried across the hall to join her. "I think there's a man lying in the wagon. Which way did your father go?"

"Not that direction," Neil said. He stepped out onto the porch and ran down toward the wagon, looking at the driver questioningly. Behind him, he heard Francesca's steps as she crossed the porch in a hurry.

The driver glanced at Neil curiously, then looked past him at Francesca and touched his hat. "It's Corky Brill, ma'am. Maybe you ought to look at him."

"Corky Brill!" Neil crossed the remaining space in long strides and looked into the back of the wagon. "You don't mean he's—"

The man in the wagon looked up and grinned. "Neil Wallacel" he said, sticking up his right hand. "By grab, they said you was comin' back." He shook his head. "No, I ain't dead, if that's what you was about to ask." He craned his neck to look at the driver. "This here is the boss's kid, Duane. He's growed some in the last eight years, but I'd know that square jaw in a million."

The driver nodded, studying Neil thoughtfully. "Glad to meetcha," he said. He turned toward Francesca. "Corky ran himself into a hunk of lead, ma'am. You reckon he's worth savin'?"

Francesca had to stand on tiptoe to see into the wagon. She looked at Corky a second, then said sharply, "If it were one of Flake Bridger's bunch, I'd say let him die, but not Corky." She looked up at the driver and smiled. "You'll have to put him in the big house, where I can look after him. I'll send the cook for Doctor Crumm."

Corky tried to sit up. "Not *him*," he said. "I ain't got over the last time he cured me of somethin'." He rubbed his chin. "I'd a heap rather take my chances with you, ma'am, if it wouldn't be putting you to too much trouble."

Francesca smiled. "All right, we'll forget about the doc-

tor." She looked at Neil. "Maybe you and Duane can carry him up."

Neil nodded. "I'll get a board. You show us where you want him."

He turned and ran across to the bunkhouse, looked around a moment, then ripped the side off one of the bunks. Within a few minutes he and the driver had shifted Corky onto the board and carried him to a small room on the second floor.

Francesca looked at Neil. "You'll have to take off his trousers. I can't do any good without seeing the wound."

Corky glanced at Neil, his face red. "Just cut off my pants leg," he said. "I don't aim to be caught without my britches and maybe not able to pull 'em on over a bandage or something."

He seemed so genuinely distressed that Neil had to laugh. "All right," he said. "I never figured you'd be so dogged modest."

He took out his pocket knife and cut off the pants leg above the wound, then stepped back to let Francesca go to work. She pushed back her sleeves and bent over the injured man.

"It's a good clean hole," she said quietly. "The bullet went clear through." She turned to Duane. "Get the cook to give you some hot water. And you'd better bring a bottle of whiskey, too."

"Yes'm." Duane hurried out of the room.

Corky looked at Neil and winked. "Don't let her pour all that whiskey on my leg," he said. "I plumb object to wastin' good liquor."

"It won't be wasted," Neil promised. "Although I don't reckon a man in your condition should befuddle himself with

whiskey." He looked at Corky thoughtfully. "What happened?"

Corky flashed him a meaning look. "Just dropped my six gun," he said. "It lit on the hammer and caught me right in the leg."

"Sure." Neil stepped over and unbuckled the gunbelt. "Well, you won't be needing your gun for the next few minutes. I'll lay it on the table here."

He moved behind Francesca and swung out the cylinder of the Colt. Five chambers were full, and he remembered that Corky always left an empty under the firing pin. The gun had obviously not been fired lately. He looked at Corky who glanced at Francesca and shook his head. Neil closed the gun, holstered it, and laid it on the table.

Duane Forbush returned with a pail of hot water and a bottle of whiskey. He grinned at Corky. "Don't get so drunk you forget about that five dollars. That's all I dragged you back home for."

"Go to—" Corky looked at Francesca. He coughed. "Go chase yourself. After the way you managed to hit all them rocks on the road, you'll be lucky if I pay you five cents."

Francesca turned to him severely. "If you don't quit talking and lie still, I'll send for Doctor Crumm yet."

"Yes'm." Corky crossed his hands on his chest and twisted his face into a look of injured innocence. "A feller can't even pass the time of day around here without somebody jumpin' down his neck." He closed his eyes.

"That's better."

Francesca got a clean sheet out of the closet, tore it in strips, and bathed the wound in hot water. She poured whiskey into the raw cut and laid her hand on Corky's fore-

head as he clamped his jaws against the pain. When he relaxed, she bound the wound with strips of cloth.

"You'll live," she announced.

"Thank the Lord!" Duane said fervently. "Now I'll get my money."

Neil looked at him, liking the man and knowing that his apparent lack of sentiment was only a pose. "I'll stay with Corky," he said. "I reckon you'll want to do something with that team out front."

"Yeah. Reckon I'd better take 'em back to Box-S."

Duane left the room. Francesca glanced down at her blood-stained hands and followed him.

Neil watched her leave, listening to her footsteps on the stairway. He turned to Corky. "I've been hoping you'd turn up," he said, "but I didn't expect to find you this way. What's it all about?"

Corky glanced toward the door. "Close it," he said. Neil did.

The little man cursed softly. "No use sayin' it in front of her, but you know danged well this wasn't no accident. Hell, I've been carryin' that gun close to thirty years and I never shot myself with it yet." He tried to rise up on his elbows but had to fall back on the bed.

"You don't know Ace Pollock, I guess. He showed up here after you went away. But you've met Flake Bridger and he's the man that sent for Ace, so you can guess what sort of cuss he is."

Neil nodded. "Let's say I've got a rough idea."

"Sure." Corky reached up to unbutton his shirt collar. "Well, this is Ace Pollock's doin'. He waited till there was no witnesses except Bridger, then he pretended to think I was goin' for my gun, and plugged me in the leg. Reckon



he would've finished the job, but just then King rode over the hill."

Neil remembered Corky too well to suspect him of exaggerating. "Why does this man Pollock want you out of the way?"

Corky managed to get to his elbows this time. "Because Flake Bridger knows I hate his guts, and Ace Pollock does anything Flake tells him to."

He tried to get a bag of tobacco out of his pocket and couldn't make it, so Neil reached for the sack and began rolling him a cigarette.

"As you know, I was foreman here when you and your ma went east. It was a good job, too, in them days. Warbird was a nice spread in spite of your pa havin' some pretty cold-blooded ideas. Well, after your ma left, takin' you with her, King was a changed man. Up to then he'd been usin' a little common sense about his dealin's with the little fellers, but from that time on it was dog eat dog."

Neil put the cigarette in Corky's mouth and lit it.

"Thanks. Well, anyway, your pa started doin' some things I couldn't stomach, so him and me didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things. Finally, I up and quit, after givin' him time to bring in this Flake Bridger from somewhere. Then your pa offered me a job on the crew and I took it. Neil, I ain't proud. Besides, I wouldn't feel right nowhere but on Warbird." He dropped back on the bed and took the cigarette out of his mouth, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "Well, that's my life history. Now what've you been doin'?"

Neil sat on the edge of the bed. "I guess you know we went to St. Louis, where my mother was from. She kept me in school there two years, hoping to make me into a bank clerk or something respectable like that, but I couldn't get used to the way people acted, so I went west into

Kansas with a freighter's outfit. He wanted me to stay on with him, but I didn't feel like going back to St. Louis again, so I hired on at a ranch near Dodge. I got along pretty good and for the last couple of years I've been foreman." He grinned. "I guess you got me trained pretty good—at least nobody had any serious complaints."

Corky matched his grin. "You was a funny kid—like the way you acted after I nailed that coyote pelt to the barn. I reckon that was your ma showin' through and I don't mean that as anything against her, either." His grin faded. "Now I'll give you some advice. Go back to Kansas. There ain't nothin' here for you but trouble. All the little ranchers are up in arms and it's workin' up to a big blowup. As soon as your pa shuts off their water supply, there's going to be lead flyin' around Warbird and there ain't any reason you've got to be mixed up in it."

Neil got up and walked over to look out the window. Corky was right—there was nothing for him on Warbird. It was too late now, though. He returned to the bedside and looked down at the injured man.

"I can't leave, at least for a while." He told about Delight's telegram. "I've made an agreement with my father. I've got to go through with it now."

Corky looked at him a long time. "I reckon you have," he admitted. "You ain't ever been one to lie, even when you was a slick-eared brat." He frowned. "You fixin' to marry this French woman?"

"She isn't French, as far as I know," Neil said. "As to whether I'm fixin' to marry her, I can't answer that question. I met her just last Christmas, when I went back to see Mother. She sort of caught me by surprise and I probably said some things I wouldn't've said if it hadn't been

for the orchestra playing, and soft lights." He grinned. "But she's right much of a woman. I'll tell you that."

Corky chuckled. "You're hooked, boy. You oughta had better sense." He shook his head. "No, I take that back. I remember, back in Colorado, when I was just starting out—" He let the sentence die. "Hell. Put that bottle where I can reach it and let me go to sleep. I feel sort of washed out."

"Sure." Neil uncorked the bottle and handed it down, and the little man took a healthy swig.

"Now if you'll just lay that six gun alongside the bed—I wouldn't put it past Ace Pollock to make another try."

"I'll be keeping an eye on you," Neil said, but he put the gun by the bed nevertheless, then pulled a chair over by the window and sat down. Presently the cowpuncher began to snore raggedly.

Neil sat by the window until after he had heard the crew ride into the ranch yard, and presently he smelled smoke from the cookshack. Once or twice he heard Francesca moving about downstairs. Otherwise, the big house was silent except for Corky's breathing. There was a peacefulness about it that was out of keeping with the unrest which he knew was just under the surface.

It struck him that he had never known this house to be truly peaceful. First, there had been the growing conflict between his parents, and now there was the war with the small ranchers. Underneath all this was some trouble between his father and Francesca. The Mexican woman had remained quiet, but it was there nonetheless. He was convinced now that Francesca had expected King Wallace to marry her, once he was freed by death from his first marriage. That would account for her constrained attitude, so noticeable the first time he had seen her again. Francesca was too good for a man like King—too loyal and too

patient. But if nothing else would make her happy, then he hoped she got her wish.

The sun was getting low when there was the sound of boots from the lower hall, muffled now because of the carpets. Neil stood up and loosened the gun in his holster. At the same time Corky's snores stopped and the bed creaked as he reached for his gun.

"I'm here," Neil said, and Corky grunted, letting the gun remain beside the bed. A man's form appeared in the doorway and Neil relaxed. It was Duane Forbush.

"You ain't dead yet?" Duane said. "You're just too danged ornery to die."

"Still worryin' about that five dollars?" Corky said. "Or is it you're beginnin' to miss me?"

Duane ignored him and turned to Neil. "I've already et, so I'll stay with this mangy critter if you feel like puttin' on the feedbag."

"Thanks." Neil crossed over to the door, realizing that he really was hungry. He got a whiff of Francesca's chile and licked his lips. "I'll be back after I eat. I'm staying in the house anyway." He went down the stairs and found Francesca waiting in the hallway.

"Come and help me eat this chile," she said. "I can't throw it out after cooking it all day."

He glanced into the dining room. "Where's my father? Didn't he come back?"

She shook her head. "He seldom eats in the house lately. Quite often he doesn't come in until long after dark." She looked at him wistfully. "It'll be nice to have company at my meal for a change."

He grinned. "You don't have to twist my arm. I've eaten your grub before." He followed her to the kitchen and sat down facing her across the red-checkered cloth. She served

two plates, and they ate without either one feeling much like talking. When they had finished, Neil offered to help with the dishes, but she pushed him away, laughing.

"You'll take a lot of kidding as it is, eating here in the main house instead of with the crew. I don't want to make it any worse."

He grinned. "They'd *all* eat here if they thought they could get away with it." He reached for his hat, hanging on a nail. "Speaking of the crew, I'll go out and meet them. There may be some of them I know, and I want to get acquainted with the others."

"There aren't many you'll be proud to call friends, I'm afraid. Half of them followed Flake Bridger to Warbird."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You don't care much for Flake, do you?"

"Do you?" She didn't wait for an answer, but turned back toward the table, and Neil went through the dining room and hall and out onto the porch. He crossed over to the bunkhouse and stepped into the smoke-filled room.

Men were lounging on their bunks, except for five who were huddled around a makeshift poker table. One puncher was trying to coax some music from a wheezy accordion. Flake Bridger, sitting on the edge of a bunk and cleaning his gun, saw Neil and got to his feet, grinning.

"Break it up, men," he said. "Here's the boss's son."

Neil flushed. There was nothing in Bridger's expression to indicate that he had meant to be sarcastic, but the effect was the same. Men looked up from their cards, their faces indicating clearly that they resented the implication that Neil's presence meant they should pay him special deference. One of the poker players threw his cards on the table and muttered something under his breath.

The foreman didn't appear to notice any of this. He came

over to Neil and laid an arm across his shoulder. "This is Neil Wallace, fellers, from St. Louis. He'll be wanting to meet you." He turned to the closest man. "Cobb, meet King's boy." He glanced at Neil. "Cobb Phillips. He's new since you left here."

The puncher ducked his head toward Neil and held out his hand, which Neil shook briefly. "Glad to know you, Phillips," Neil said. The other man didn't speak. Neil could feel the growing animosity. He had always gotten along well with other men, but Bridger, either intentionally or without thinking, had set him off on the wrong foot.

"This is Ace Pollock, my *segundo*," Bridger said.

Pollock grinned at Neil, but his grin was lacking in friendliness. "Howdy," he said. He glanced down at the gun he had been oiling, then back at Neil. "Can't shake hands. I'm all covered with grease. Wouldn't want to dirty your hands." He looked aside at Bridger and his grin widened.

The foreman started toward the next man, but Neil laid a hand on his shoulder. "This isn't necessary. "I'll meet the men later on, when we're working together."

Bridger looked surprised. "Why, sure," he said. "Anything you say." He looked around the room and raised his eyebrows significantly. "Reckon he's got more important things to do than hang around a stinkin' bunkhouse, men." He laughed. "He ain't bunkin' out here with the rest of us saddlebums. He's sleepin' in the big house." He stepped aside so that Neil could get to the doorway. "Just let us know when you're comin' back and we'll try to have things cleaned up a little better."

Neil looked around at the group of men, then put his steady gaze on Ace Pollock. "Well, now, I haven't noticed any dirt I wasn't expecting. I've been with Corky Brill all afternoon."

Ace Pollock's grin disappeared and he half rose from his bunk, then his eyes dropped to the gun in his lap.

"What's the matter?" Neil asked pleasantly. "Too many witnesses?"

The room became breathlessly quiet until Bridger said suddenly, "Go on with your game, men. What the hell!"

Neil looked around the room and thought he detected a few friendly eyes. He turned his back and stepped out into the yard. Behind him, he heard Bridger say angrily. "Damn it, Ace. Ain't you got any brains at all?"

Neil crossed the yard and entered the big house, going directly upstairs. Duane Forbush's cigarette glowed from the doorway of Corky's room, and Duane said gruffly, "He's asleep. You reckon one of us ought to ride herd on him?"

"No," Neil said. "If Ace tries anything tonight, it won't be Corky he's after. You might as well go back to the bunkhouse." He caught Duane's sleeve as the puncher started to move past him. "Watch yourself, cowboy. You and Corky seem to be friends, and there might be some who'll hold that against you."

"Hell," Duane said bluntly, "I reckon I can still decide who's my friend and who ain't." He felt for Neil's hand in the darkness. "G'night, friend."

Neil gripped his fingers. "Good night, cowboy." He wanted to say more, but knew that Duane would be embarrassed. He listened to Duane's steps on the stairway, then moved on down the hall to his own room.

## Chapter Six

ABOUT MIDNIGHT Neil awakened to hear steps on the stairway. He eased himself out of bed and lifted his gun out of the holster hanging on a chair close to his pillow, then flattened himself against the wall and waited. The footsteps reached the upper hall, hesitated, then retreated. Neil stepped out into the darkened hallway in time to hear a door open. There was the sound of a match being scratched, and a coal oil lamp flared in one of the bedrooms across the hall, its yellow light revealing his father's craggy features. The rancher adjusted the wick, tossed his hat on a table, and crossed his bedroom to close the hall door, not seeing Neil standing at the other end of the hall.

Neil moved quietly to Corky's room and looked in. Faint moonlight lay across the floor, not bright enough to let him recognize the wounded puncher. Neil listened for a few moments to Corky's heavy breathing, then went back to his room and lay down. He had just started to drift off to sleep again when he was aroused by a dull boom which rattled his bedroom window. He lay in frowning concentration for a few seconds, thinking it might be repeated, then jumped out as his father's bedroom door banged open and the rancher ran out into the hall. At the same time Corky snorted and then groaned.

Neil ran to Corky's doorway. "You all right?"

Corky swore. "Damn it, I forgot about this leg and tried to get out of bed. Sure, I'm all right." He hesitated. "Something woke me up."

"Sounded like an explosion," Neil said. He turned to see



his father watching him across the hall, his features harshly outlined in the circle of light from the lamp he was holding.

"That damned Dutchman!" King put the lamp on a table and beckoned to Neil. "Come on. There's hell to pay for sure."

Neil ran back to his bedroom and dressed rapidly, strapping his gunbelt around his waist. He didn't understand fully what his father was talking about, but realized that this could come later. When he reached the yard, his father was in the front of the bunkhouse shouting for Bridger, who burst out of the doorway, six gun in his hand.

"They've blown up the dam," King shouted angrily. "It must've been that lousy Dutchman. I didn't think he had the guts." He turned toward the horse barn. "It may be a trick to get us off the place. Have some of the crew stay here. The rest of 'em come with me."

Flake turned and yelled something into the bunkhouse, and men began tumbling out the door, pulling on their clothes as they came. Bridger called a few names. "You men stay here. Everybody else saddle up."

Neil saw Duane Forbush and grabbed him by the shoulder. "You'd better stick around," he said softly. "One of us has to keep an eye on Corky."

The puncher hesitated a moment, then dropped back. Neil ran to the barn where men were already cursing their startled mounts. Somebody had lit a lantern, and Neil grabbed his saddle and slapped it on the back of the first unclaimed horse he came to, a big bay gelding with a wild look in its eyes. He pulled the bridle over its head and slipped the bit into its mouth, then led it from the stall and out into the yard. Several of the men were already mounted, including King Wallace on his black stallion. The rancher whirled the stallion on its haunches and jabbed it with his spurs.

"Follow me!" he ordered.

Neil vaulted into the saddle. As he had half expected, the bay gelding was wound up. It fought him savagely for a few moments, then settled into a series of crowhops, after which it took off with powerful strides. Neil touched it with his spurs and soon overtook the rest of the crew, all of them riding recklessly in the moonlight.

King's words to Bridger had been sufficient explanation of the explosion. Apparently King had jumped to the conclusion that Dutch Shortinghuis had dynamited some dam King was building. Remembering Shortinghuis' angry words in front of the café, Neil could readily believe that he might have done something of the sort. It occurred to Neil that—in Dutch's place—he might feel like doing the same thing. Still, he had given his word to be on Warbird's side in this fight, within certain limits. If someone had dynamited the dam, this seemed to fall within those restrictions.

The other riders soon pulled their mounts to a walk so Neil reined in the big bay. "Stay back from the dam," King said curtly. "We might find some tracks." He turned in his saddle. "Is Stubblefield here?"

"Here I am, Mr. Wallace." A man came on foot out of the shadows. "I was waitin' to see who you fellers was." He paused and struck a match, the glare reflecting from a rifle he was holding. "Wait a minute till I light this lantern." The lantern flared, its light revealing Stubby's serious face. "Looks like somebody played hell with your dam, Mr. Wallace."

King frowned at the scattered heap of rocks. "Crazy fools! They ought to know it won't hold us up long. Leave it to a dumb Dutchman!" He turned. "Phillips, you're the best tracker around here. See what you can find."

"Sure, boss." The man Neil had met in the bunkhouse

swung out of his saddle and moved over toward the dam. "Give me the lantern, Stubby." He took the lantern and walked slowly along the edge of the creek, which had spread out to its original size now that the dam was wrecked. Presently he knelt down and stared at something.

"Here it is, boss. This track was made after the water fanned out." He chuckled. "Whoever done this wasn't very smart. There ain't another horseshoe like this in Wyoming Territory."

He got to his feet and looked up at King. "That print was made by Dutch Shortinghuis' big stud. It's the only horse that—"

"I knew it!" King made a circling motion with his arm. "Come on, men. We'll catch up with the bastard before he knows we're on to him." He gigged his stallion and whirled off toward the south, the crew following him. Neil heard Stubblefield holler something and pulled the bay to a stop.

"What's that?"

The little rancher picked up the lantern that Phillips had left on the ground and held it shoulder high, squinting up at Neil. His serious expression lightened momentarily. "By grab, it's Neil Wallace!" He shook his head. "I'm glad to see you again, Neil, but you sure picked a bum time to come back home."

"I didn't exactly pick it," Neil said. He leaned down from the saddle. "What was it you just hollered?"

"Nothin'." Stubblefield's glum expression returned. "I just thought maybe your pa was goin' off half-cocked, but it wouldn't make any difference if I told him so. Nobody ever changed his mind about anything yet." He lowered the lantern. "By golly, this country's changed since you left, Neil. Sometimes I don't know what to make of it."

"Nor me either," Neil said. "Well, I'd better catch up with the others. I'm not sure I could find Shortinghuis' place at night after this long a time." He lifted his reins and took off after the distant sound of galloping horses. By the time he had closed the gap, they were turning under a wooden archway bearing some faded lettering which Neil couldn't make out in the moonlight. The riders pulled their animals to a walk and drew up in front of a one-story house.

"Spread out," King said. "This Dutchman's got a scatter-gun and he knows we're here."

The riders moved apart, Neil pulling up alongside his father, who gave him a sideways look, then whirled to face the house as the door opened and a solid-looking man stepped into the open, the moonlight identifying him as Dutch Shortinghuis. Neil saw that his father had been right. The Dutchman had a shotgun in his right hand, the barrel lying across his left forearm.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Dutch demanded furiously. "Ridin' into a man's ranch in the middle of the night. Wakin' up the old woman and the kids. You act like you owned the world."

King edged his horse forward a step. "Don't try to bluff me, Dutch." He pointed. "I notice you're fully dressed. I suppose you're going to claim you've been sleepin' with your clothes on."

The Dutchman stepped away from the house. "By Gott! What I do on my own ranch ain't anybody's damn business." He looked around at the mounted men. "Anyway, I've been reading."

Flake Bridger laughed derisively. "Readin'! You ought to think up something better than that, you fat fool. You ain't got brains enough to write your own name!"

The Dutchman stiffened, his shotgun lifting toward the

foreman. Then Bridger's hand made a swift motion and his six gun spouted flame. Shortinghuis staggered backward as his shotgun roared. A man screamed and Neil whirled around to see one of the riders slump in his saddle. Then there sounded the bang of a door and when Neil turned back, the Dutchman was gone.

"It's Cobb Phillips," someone said sharply. "Why the hell would he want to kill him?"

Neil watched them ease Phillips out of the saddle and lay him on the ground. "He likely wasn't aiming at Phillips," he said. "He was staggering when he pulled the trigger."

"Does it make any difference?" his father asked bluntly. "Warbird takes care of its men." He flashed Neil a quick look, then turned to bark an order to Bridger. "Circle the house. He might get away."

Bridger gave a command, and men rode around the corners of the house, their six guns shining in the moonlight. Neil stayed where he was, hating it and yet forced to admit that his father had been justified, in a way. It had appeared obvious that Shortinghuis was about to shoot *someone*.

King turned toward Neil. "All right boy. We'll see whose side you're on. Tell 'em to open up."

Neil stepped out of the saddle and approached the door, keeping out of a direct line. He reached out to rap with his knuckles. "Open up," he said. "We've got you surrounded."

There was a moment's pause, then the door opened. A heavy woman who was clutching a faded bathrobe around her shoulders stepped out onto the dirt. "There's nobody here but me and the babies, and we haven't hurt anybody."

"Make her send Dutch out," King ordered harshly. "He's the one we're after."

The woman crossed over to where he was sitting. She looked up at him. "You're King Wallace," she said. "I don't

suppose you know when a person's telling the truth, you're such a liar yourself."

King started in his stirrups. "By God!" He looked at Neil. "He's in there someplace. Make her bring the kids out."

Neil reached for the woman's arm, but she shook his hand away. "You're no better, mister. You're just like your pa."

"You'd better bring them out," Neil said, hating himself. "Either that or make your husband come out where we can see him. I'm sorry."

She gave him a long look, then moved wearily toward the house. "All right. I'll get 'em. They're scared half to death already, after that shooting."

She disappeared into the house, and Neil stepped back from the doorway. Presently she came back carrying one child and shoving two others in front of her. King watched them for a moment, then got to the ground, drawing his gun.

"All right, Neil. Flush him out."

Neil smiled grimly. He could refuse and be branded a coward, or he could go in and possibly walk into a shotgun blast. He thumbed back the hammer of his six gun and stepped quickly through the doorway, drawing away from the opening immediately. He listened tensely without hearing anything for a moment and decided that he was alone. A thin crack of light shone underneath a door at the other side of the room and he moved toward it, jerking as his father suddenly shouted something.

"Watch it back there, Bridger," King yelled. "Neil's in the house."

Neil grinned to himself, thinking that Bridger would probably just as soon shoot him as Dutch. He reached the door,

turned the knob slowly and kicked the door open, his gun ready.

There was no one in this room either, although a lamp burned on the table, its wavering light illuminating an open book which was written in an unfamiliar language. He remembered what Dutch had said about reading. Maybe the Dutchman had been telling the truth. He crossed the room to another door, suddenly convinced that the house was empty. Another few minutes investigation proved that he was right and he returned to the front yard.

"He's gone. The place is empty."

His father swore and crossed to the doorway, pushing past Neil into the house. He strode to the lighted room, picked up the lamp, and brought it back to the front door, letting its light shine on some fresh bloodstains on the doorstep.

"He won't get far," he said with satisfaction. "By God, no damn Dutchman can make a fool of me." He looked down at the oil lamp and laughed savagely. "Maybe this will show them fool ranchers!"

He hurled the lamp on the floor, and the glass shattered, spilling coal oil which flared up suddenly. Neil took an involuntary step forward, but his father pushed him back.

"Let it burn," he said. "There ain't room for me and the Dutchman around here any more, even if he's alive." He pushed past Neil and out into the yard.

Neil looked at the spreading flames, which had caught some window curtains. The heat was already so bad that he had to get out. In front of the house, he saw Mrs. Shortinghuis and the children staring round-eyed at the flames. He felt an instant sympathy for their plight, but knew there was no use expressing his feelings. Instead, he went around the house and headed toward the barn where he found a lantern and lit it. There were two big work-

horses in their stalls and he prowled around until he had found a wagon, to which he harnessed the team. He got onto the seat and drove around until he had found a wagon, to which he harnessed the team. He got onto the seat and drove around to the front of the house, fighting them all the way because they were excited by the flames, which had now spread to the roof. He stopped the wagon in front of the family.

"Get in," he said. "You can't spend the night out in the open. I'll take you to one of your neighbors."

Mrs. Shortinghuis looked at him curiously a moment, then motioned for the older children to crawl into the back of the wagon. She climbed onto the seat still holding the baby, which had begun to cry.

"I don't know where we'll go," she said. "We ain't got any friends around here. They don't like the way we talk."

"I'll take you to Will Turner's. He wouldn't turn you away."

She nodded heavily. "He's a good man, Will Turner. His girl always speaks to me in town."

Neil turned to one of the cowboys who had been bending over Cobb Phillips' body. "Tie my horse to the tailgate, will you?"

The man looked at King, who nodded, then gathered up the bay's reins and started to fasten them to the back of the wagon. The oldest boy said in a high voice, "I'll hold 'em, mister." He took the reins.

Neil slapped the lines against the horses' rumps and drove off, his father watching him speculatively. As they cleared the ranch yard he heard King shout, "We'll find him tomorrow, men. No use looking for his tracks tonight. He'll likely bleed to death and save us the trouble."

The woman beside Neil sobbed once, then was quiet.



"He may be all right, ma'am," Neil reassured her. "It was pretty dark for anyone to shoot straight."

She turned to look at him. "What difference does it make, mister? If he's alive, your pa's bound to hunt him down." She turned away angrily. "Don't try to talk to me any more. Just because you're takin' us somewhere don't mean you're any better than the others."

The wagon rattled along the rough road and turned off on Will Turner's rutted lane. Even in the moonlight, things looked familiar. It was here on Broken Bow that Neil had spent so much of his time as a boy. Now everything was changed. He pulled up the team some distance from the house and cupped his hand to his mouth.

"Open up," he shouted. "I'm coming in."

Presently a light flared in the ranch house and after another moment Will Turner stepped out into the yard, carrying a rifle. "Who's there?"

"It's me—Neil Wallace. You told me to stay off your place, but I've brought you some folks in trouble."

"Come on in then."

Neil clucked to the team and they moved over to where the rancher stood. As they got closer, Neil saw a gun barrel protruding from the darkened doorway. He stiffened, but just then the muzzle was lowered and the girl he had seen in town stepped out into the moonlight. She was wearing a thin wrapper which the breeze whipped against her body, and Neil caught his breath. This couldn't be the little kid he had known eight years ago.

He realized that Mrs. Shortinghuis was watching him and he felt the blood rising in his neck, so he turned quickly away.

"These folks got burned out," he said. "They need a place to stay."

Marcia leaned the gun against the house and hurried over to the wagon, reaching up for the baby. "Why, it's the Shortinghuis family," she said softly. "You poor folks. Here, let me take her."

As she took the baby from Mrs. Shortinghuis' hands, her robe fell apart. Neil looked away quickly, clearing his throat. The boy in the wagon said, "What shall I do with these reins?" and Neil welcomed the interruption.

"Let 'em drop, son," he said. "He won't run away." He watched the two children scramble out of the wagon, then got to the ground himself, still holding the lines. He faced Will Turner.

"Maybe you can put up this team. There ain't anybody over there to look out for them."

"What's happened to Dutch?" Turner asked sharply.

"He's been shot. He's likely in the hills by now." Neil told briefly about the dynamiting and the events that followed, while the rancher watched him stonily.

Mrs. Shortinghuis spoke from the doorway. "That's a lie. Dutch didn't blow up anything. He never left the place." She took the baby back from Marcia and went into the house. Marcia came over to stand beside her father.

"Something's wrong here," Turner said. "I wouldn't figure Dutch's wife to be a liar."

Marcia looked up at Neil thoughtfully. "Regardless of who's lying," she said, "you know it was wrong to burn the house."

Neil nodded. "It wasn't my idea. It wasn't my idea to blow up the dam, either. Sometimes things like that just happen and then it's too late to do anything about it."

She touched his arm with her fingertips. "It *isn't* too late, Neil. You don't have to take up your father's fight. You could help us little ranchers. You know we're in the right."

He was thrilled by her nearness and by the tone of her voice, but he had to shake his head, remembering his promise. "I'm sorry, but it isn't that simple. I've got certain responsibilities and I can't sneak out of 'em that easy." He turned away from her reluctantly to look at Will Turner. "I told my father I wouldn't fight against *you*, Mr. Turner. That's all I could do."

The rancher shook his head. "You're not doing me any favor that way, Neil, leaving me out of it. You're either on one side or the other. Don't try to play the middle." He turned toward his daughter.

"Marcia, you're going to have to forget you ever knew Neil. He isn't the same boy he was eight years ago. I don't want you seeing him again. I'm sorry."

She looked at Neil for a long moment, and he hoped she might say something to give him some encouragement, but she finally turned away and went into the house. Neil handed Turner the lines, gathered up his own reins, and crawled wearily into the saddle. Before he reached the road, he heard the door close.

## Chapter Seven

NEIL SLEPT very little during the remainder of that night and at the first gray promise of dawn he was up and dressed. He stopped at Corky's room and found the little puncher sitting on the edge of his bed, trying to pull on his boots.

"Just where do you think *you're* going?" Neil demanded.

Corky swore. "I sure ain't going to lie here like some danged baby!" he said stubbornly. "If you'll give me a hand, I'll walk over to the cookshack and get some grub. Otherwise, I'll crawl there on my hands and knees."

Neil grinned. "You haven't lost any of your orneriness, I see. Okay, I'll help you then, but don't tell Francesca. She likes havin' somebody to make a fuss over."

He finished putting on Corky's boots, then put one muscular arm around the puncher's waist, practically lifting him to his feet. Sweat stood out on Corky's face, but he didn't complain. With Neil providing most of the power, they went down the steps and out into the yard.

Two or three of the riders were standing around the door of the cookshack, picking their teeth. They spoke to Corky glumly, their spirits still dampened by what had happened to Cobb Phillips. They nodded at Neil, showing neither friendliness nor dislike. Apparently his going into the house after Dutch had made some impression.

One of the men took the toothpick out of his mouth and addressed Corky. "I guess you heard about Cobb."

"Neil told me when he came in." The little puncher shook his head. "Too bad it had to be him. He was a good man."

The other man nodded and went back to picking his teeth. Neil helped Corky into the cookshack and eased him down onto a bench. There were half a dozen men busy with their food. The cook, a Chinese, filled a plate and set it in front of Corky, then glanced at Neil.

"You eat with rest of clew?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why not?" Neil stepped across the bench and sat down.

The Chinaman's head bobbed and he smiled broadly. "I say I bet you eat Cholly's grub. You not be solly." He turned to the stove and heaped ham and eggs on a plate,

which he set in front of Neil, then put out two cups of black coffee.

Neil looked around at the other men, all of them engrossed in their eating. The foreman was not among them and Neil was pleased. Sooner or later, he and Flake Bridger were going to clash, but he would as soon let it ride until he knew the lay of the land. Besides, if Bridger had been there, he might have tested his authority by assigning Neil some kind of work, in which case Neil would be reasonable enough to follow orders, out of respect to a ramrod's right to boss everyone but the owner. Neil wasn't averse to authority, but this particular morning he wanted to tend to some business of his own. He dug into the food hurriedly.

Duane Forbush came into the shack before Neil had finished eating, and sat down next to him, treating him with casual friendliness. For the moment, everything was serene, a typical cookshack breakfast, with the pleasant smells of ham and coffee and none of the undercurrent of antagonism which had been so evident the night before in the bunkhouse. Neil wiped his plate with a piece of bread and pushed it away from him. He reached for his sack of tobacco and turned toward Corky.

"I reckon you can navigate all right if I leave you here. I've got a few things to do."

"Sure." The little puncher grinned. "Shucks, boy, I was navigatin' around Warbird when you was little enough to ride a broomstick around the place." He leaned forward and looked sourly at Duane. "Besides, that feller there beside you ain't going to let anything happen to me 'till he gets paid that five dollars he beat me out of."

"You ain't foolin'," Duane said, winking. "I'd take it out of your hide, but they're just payin' two dollars for coyote pelts now."

Neil got to his feet and faced another man he remembered seeing at the Shortinghuis place the night before. The other man looked at him curiously, and Neil smiled. "I left Dutch's ranch before you did. Did you happen to see anything of that man who works over there?"

The cowboy shook his head. "Come to think of it, I didn't." He grinned. "I reckon he was smart enough to light out before we showed up."

"Likely." Neil stepped back to let the man pass, then followed him out into the yard. The other men had gone to get their horses, but Flake Bridger was over by the main house, talking to King Wallace. They looked at Neil, who waited for them to say something, but neither of them spoke so he cut across toward the barn, found the sorrel he had ridden the day before, and saddled up. A few minutes later he rode out of the yard, headed toward Stubblefield's Box-S.

He rode slowly this morning, enjoying his first good view of Warbird. It was a prosperous looking spread, with many small bunches of fat steers grazing contentedly here and there. The sun was beginning to rise and the air held an early morning freshness. It awakened old memories, making him sit a little straighter in the saddle.

When he came in sight of the dam, he immediately knew that one object of the ride was doomed to failure, for several of the Warbird punchers were already busy making repairs, dragging stones back from where they had been scattered the night before. This meant that there would be no opportunity to read the tracks for himself.

Realizing this, he turned the sorrel toward the Shortinghuis property. No doubt Cobb Phillips had been right anyway, he told himself. It probably had been the hoofprint of Dutch's horse. What was bothering him now was that there

had been no saddle horse in Dutch's barn the night before, only the work team. Regardless of Dutch's guilt or innocence, it seemed reasonable to expect to find the horse in its stable. He eased up on the reins and the sorrel broke into a lope which soon brought him to Dutch's place.

Viewed in broad daylight, the burned house was as ugly as a fresh scar. An acrid smell of burned cloth hung like a pall over the whole area, and little wisps of smoke lingered above the ashes. Neil's mood darkened when he remembered that he had been part of this uncalled-for destruction. He stared at it bleakly for a few moments, then dismounted and tied the sorrel to an apple tree to which blossoms still clung. Leaving the horse, he circled the burned house and headed for the barn, a big two-story structure painted blue.

The barn door was still open, and there was no indication that it had been disturbed since he had driven the team out the night before, but he entered cautiously nevertheless, still wondering what had become of the cowboy who had offered brief resistance to his father in Diamond's saloon the other day. At the thought, he shook his head wryly. Only yesterday, actually, but it seemed like a long time ago. Too many things had happened in that short period—few of them good.

He had stepped away from the open doorway as soon as he was inside the barn, and as his eyes became accustomed to the comparative gloom, he concluded that he was alone. To satisfy himself that this was true, he drew his Colt and checked each stall, finding nothing out of line. He holstered his gun and was about to leave the building when he thought about the second floor, which could reasonably be expected to be a hayloft. He located the ladder made of slats nailed across the studding, and put his foot on the first rung.

There was no way to enter the hayloft except to stick

his head through the square opening, which would expose him to anybody in the loft. However, it was almost entirely dark up above, so there was a possibility that even if there should be someone there, he would hesitate until he knew who was climbing the ladder. Besides, it was very unlikely that Dutch would have holed up in the hayloft, since it was one of the first places anyone would normally search. Reasoning this way, Neil thrust his head and shoulders into the opening and hurriedly pulled the rest of his body through. He put one foot on the floor and had started to step away from the hole when something crashed down on his head, making him stagger and fall. He tried to draw his gun, but his reactions had been slowed by shock, and before he could finish the motion something hard and cold was jammed against the back of his neck.

"Did you get him?"

It was the Dutchman's voice, weak and muffled, but still recognizable. Since it came from the other side of the loft, evidently the man who had hit him was the puncher.

"I've got him."

Neil stiffened in surprise.

"Marcia?"

He heard her gasp. "Neill Is it Neil?"

"Don't let him trick you!" Dutch warned. "He's a Wallace."

"I know." The gun barrel still pushed against Neil's neck.

"You *are* Neil, aren't you?"

"I'm Neil." He started to sit up, but the gun pushed him back.

"Don't move. I'm not going to let you hurt Mr. Shortinghuis any more. You've done him enough damage."

She sounded a little wild, and Neil realized that she was frightened. Until he could convince her of his peaceful in-



tentions, she'd continue to hold the gun on him. Meanwhile, some of Warbird's crew might have the same idea he did. He twisted an arm behind his back and touched the end of the rifle. Grabbing it suddenly, he rolled over on his back, trying to jerk the rifle out of her fingers.

She hung on and fell across him, her head against his chest. His nostrils were filled with the sweet womanly scent of her, and he pulled her against him, burying his face in her soft hair.

"Marcia," he murmured. "Marcial"

She ceased struggling and let the rifle slip out of her fingers. For a second their lips found each other in the darkness, and she moaned softly.

"Marcial" The Dutchman sounded alarmed. "Are you all right? By Gott, if that man—"

"I'm all right." She pulled away then, Neil making no effort to hold her. He didn't attempt to find the rifle, but got to his feet. His hand found her arm, but she shook it off. Yet he couldn't forget the way her lips had been offered, and it gladdened him.

"All right, Neil." Her voice was coldly impersonal now. "You've found him. I suppose you're going to drag him back to Warbird. Your father would like that."

"No." He took a match out of his pocket and struck it, but the Dutchman cried sharply, "Not up here, man! This whole place'll go up like tinder!"

Neil smothered the match between his thumb and finger, but the brief flare had shown him Marcia's face, her pupils dilated.

"I've got no quarrel with Dutch," he said. "I'm just trying to figure out what happened last night." He took a step toward the Dutchman, but a sudden metallic click stopped him in his tracks.

"Move away from him, Marcia," Dutch said sharply. "I'm liable to hit you both."

"Wait!" Marcia's voice was strained. "Somebody might hear the gun. We don't want *that* to happen."

"Then get him out of here," Dutch growled. "He's not up here for any good." He swore. "I wouldn't trust a Wallace as far as I would a rattlesnake."

"For God's sake," Neil said hotly, "if I hated you that bad, why wouldn't I stay down below and wait for help? You're stuck up here and you know it. Show a little sense, man!"

Dutch groaned. "All right—like you say, you've got me in a bind. What the hell d'you want?"

"That's better." Neil could hear Marcia breathing rapidly in the darkness, but she stayed out of the argument. "All I want to know is this: what's happened to the man you had working for you—and where's that big stud of yours?"

"Be careful, Mr. Shortinghuis," Marcia said quickly. "He may be trying to trick you."

Dutch grunted. "If he is, there ain't much I can do about it. All right, Wallace, I'll answer your questions. Suggs and the horse are both gone. Likely they went together, but I can't be sure. Now will you go away?"

"Not quite yet." Neil lowered his voice. "Tell me what happened last night."

"Sure I'll tell you." Dutch shifted his weight, and the straw rustled. "You already heard it once when I told it to King. I was home all evening, reading a book. Suggs had took off somewhere on the horse, and I was worried because he wasn't back. That's why I was up so late. Now go away and leave me alone. If I say any more, it'll be with this shotgun."

"I'll go." Neil moved over to the hole in the floor, grimly

aware of the fact that he would be a perfect target when he started down the ladder. Then Marcia moved over beside him.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked suspiciously. "Tell all this to your father?"

"Damn it, what I ought to do is give you a good spanking!" Neil paused on the ladder with his head at floor level. "If you really want to know, I'm not going to do anything. I'll tell you this much, though. If Dutch is still here when somebody else comes along, he won't come out of it so easy. That's *one* thing you'd better believe."

She didn't answer immediately, and Neil began to hope that her attitude had softened, but when she did speak, her tone was bitter. "Then it's probably the *only* thing. It wouldn't surprise me if you're back here with the Warbird crew within an hour."

"Good Lord, Marcia," Neil said earnestly. "Can't you see I'm trying to give Dutch a break? I don't like this business of burning a man's house any more than you do."

"Then why don't you do something about it? If you won't come over to our side, the least you can do is stay out of it entirely. There's nothing forcing you to take up your father's fight."

"But there is." Neil told her about Delight and his deal with King. He was unable to see her expression in the darkness, but could almost feel her animosity in the air. He finished and waited uneasily for her next words.

"Delight DuBois," she said musingly. "Either she's pretty important or you don't care much about right and wrong. All right, it's your decision, but don't expect me to pretend to like it. You can't be much of a man to let a thing like that turn you into a beast. I was hoping my father was wrong, but I see he wasn't. You're not the same boy I used

to know. Now go away and do whatever you're planning on doing. I won't bother you any more about it."

Her boots echoed hollowly as she moved away from the trap door, and Neil went down the ladder and left the barn. Dejectedly, he went back to the apple tree and untied his horse, climbing heavily into the saddle. He headed toward the dam without looking back.

Halfway there, he met his father and Flake Bridger, with three Warbird punchers. They reined up and waited for him to come up. His father looked at him narrowly. "Where've you been?"

"At Shortinghuis' place," Neil said. He met his father's steady stare. "It struck me that I didn't hear anybody ride away from there last night after the trouble, but there wasn't any riding horse in the barn."

"Well?" King seemed to be weighing Neil's words.

"Nobody left the place after we got there," Neil said bluntly. "The only tracks around the place have been blotted out by those from Warbird."

The rancher frowned in thought. "Which means?"

Neil shrugged. "I don't know what it means to you, but to me it means that whoever blew up the dam must've kept right on going. At any rate, he didn't head for Dutch's place." He paused. "I don't claim to be too smart about these things, but if it was me, I'd try to pick up the tracks near the dam and find out just which way that big stallion *did* go."

There was a grudging admiration in King's eyes, but before he could speak, Flake Bridger cut in.

"That don't prove nothin', kid. He could've tied his stallion somewhere without ridin' it to the barn."

Neil grinned. "If you'd just blown up somebody's dam, would *you* leave your horse where you couldn't get to it in

a hurry? Like hell you would!" He pulled off the trail. "However, you're the boss here. Go ahead and look for yourself if you want to."

"Maybe I'll just do that." Bridger put his horse into motion.

"Wait!" King's voice was sharp, commanding, and Bridger yanked his horse to a stop.

"You said you didn't see any tracks over there, Neil." King was deadly intent. "Tell me, did you see anything else that looked suspicious?"

Neil shook his head. "No. I went all over the place. Even up into the hayloft. I didn't see anything that made me think Dutch was guilty."

The rancher shrugged. "That's good enough for me. We'll go back to the dam and look for prints." He looked at Bridger meaningly. "That is, unless somebody has some objections."

The foreman grinned crookedly. "Hell, boss. Don't get so touchy. It's just that I want to catch the skunk that blew up that dam."

He whirled his horse and started toward the dam, the others following. Neil waited to roll a cigarette, and watched them grow smaller in the distance until they disappeared behind a little hummock. He hadn't lied, but it wouldn't set any worse with his father if he had, once the facts were known. As to Bridger, he hoped Marcia succeeded in getting Dutch out of danger before the foreman had a chance to get off by himself.

At thought of Marcia, he crushed out the cigarette and dropped it by the trail.

## Chapter Eight

THE LAST couple of hundred miles had been about all Delight DuBois could stand. Now, thank heavens, the trip was almost over. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat and opened the cover of her little reticule, taking out a small mirror and examining her reflection irritably. How could a girl keep looking pretty when the very air was full of dust and cinders, and there were none of the facilities a civilized person could expect? Damn such a country! Neil must have been crazy to describe Wyoming in such glowing terms.

A trainman lurched into the front end of the car, bracing himself against the side of the doorway. He made his way to Delight's seat, placing his feet far apart to keep from being thrown off balance. "Kingvale in just a few minutes, miss," he said. He reached up and got her valise from the overhead rack and put it beside her on the seat.

"Thank you." Delight gave him her most ladylike smile. The man might be a native of this awful part of the country, and she didn't want to spoil the effect she hoped to create. From what she had heard, these Westerners had a way of classifying women and of treating them accordingly. The fools! Women were all alike, whether they sold their charms openly or used them to trap some man into providing them with security. All these thoughts she concealed behind a mask of feigned pleasure, the kind of pleasure a nice girl would feel as she neared a reunion with her lover.

She finished repairing her appearance insofar as possible

and was satisfied by the expressions on the faces of those men who were able to see her without making their interest too obvious. By then, the train was grinding to a stop, the car wheels screaming horribly. She closed the reticule and adjusted her hat. The next few minutes were very important. If she could make the right first impression, her campaign would be half won.

She waited for the train to come to a full stop, then got to her feet, a quick glance through the dirty window disclosing that there were several men lounging in the shade of the depot, and that Neil Wallace was standing unsmilingly apart from the others. Well, at least he was good-looking. She'd hate to go to all this trouble for a homely little runt—like the St. Louis banker, for instance.

The men in the car followed her with their eyes as she moved down the aisle to the door. She poised uncertainly on the top step for a moment, knowing very well how appealing she could look when she tried, then she pretended to see Neil for the first time and she let her eyes widen in feigned relief.

As she had known he would, Neil hurried to the car steps, removing his hat as he came. He reached up a hand to help her down, and she stepped quickly against him, putting her arms around his waist and lifting her face so that there was nothing he could do but kiss her, although he looked surprised.

She pretended to be holding him off. "Not here, Neil," she said quickly. "Not in front of all these people." She looked embarrassedly at the grinning bystanders, noting particularly one little man who wasn't grinning, but was watching the scene with grim concentration.

"Welcome to Kingvale, Delight," Neil said, a little red in the face. "It's nice seeing you again." He picked up her

valise and started to lead her across the gravel toward a waiting buggy. As they rounded the end of the depot, they almost bumped into a tall man who was hurrying toward the train. He stepped aside quickly, lifting his hat as he saw Delight.

"My apologies, miss. I'm afraid I wasn't watching where I was going." He looked at Neil and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Wallace. We seem to have a habit of meeting near the railroad tracks."

"Howdy, Davenport." Delight thought Neil looked pleased at the interruption. "This is Miss DuBois, from St. Louis. She's visiting Warbird."

"It's a pleasure, Miss DuBois," Davenport said, bowing over her hand. "I hope you'll stay around long enough so we all have a chance to meet you."

"I certainly intend to, Mr. Davenport." Delight glanced up at Neil and saw the little frown that he quickly concealed. She looked back at the Englishman. "You don't talk the way I'd expected Westerners to."

Davenport laughed. "I'm afraid I'm not entitled to that designation, Miss DuBois. I wish I were." He looked up quickly as the engine began to puff. "Excuse me, please. I have something I want the engineer to drop off up the line a ways." He smiled again and hurried on toward the train.

"Such a nice man," Delight said, squeezing Neil's arm a little. "Is he a friend of yours?"

Neil hesitated. "I think so," he said finally. "It's a little hard to figure out who's my friend around here just now."

She watched his face, realizing that she had stumbled onto something unexpected. Remembering the little man by the depot, she said, "There's one man over there who certainly doesn't look very friendly—that ugly little man with the flat hat."



"That's Hub Talbert," he said. "And you're right. He's not friendly to Warbird. The man next to him was Cal Mullhol-land, the marshal."

She looked up at him and laughed excitedly. "Goodness. Don't tell me I'm running into a feud of some kind. I thought they just had those in the South."

He glanced down at her and grinned. "I reckon people have feuds wherever they come together. Let's forget it. I want to show you some of that country I was bragging about."

"And I want to see it. I've been watching it from the train window."

She held out her arms and let him lift her into the buggy, falling against him in such a way that their faces touched momentarily. One of the men by the depot laughed coarsely, and Neil turned to look at him. The man's laugh died, and he turned and walked hurriedly away. Delight had a sobering thought. Maybe Neil had another side beside the one he had shown in St. Louis. She'd have to be more careful than she'd anticipated.

The ride to Warbird passed pleasantly enough, except that Neil's holstered gun kept getting between them. Perhaps it was just as well—she wouldn't want to overplay her hand. As Neil pointed out the features which he seemed to consider noteworthy, she said the right things, indicating that she was properly thrilled, while all the time she was wondering how anybody in his right mind could stay in a country like this in preference to the cities with their lights and excitement.

Toward the end of the ride she had difficulty keeping her mind on what Neil was saying. Her thoughts were already running ahead, wondering how Neil's father would act when they first met. Toward the last, Lucinda had talked a

good deal about King Wallace, so Delight felt as though she knew him pretty well in advance. Yet one of the things Lucinda had said was that her husband had been a man of impulse—that he did the unexpected. She'd have to watch her step.

They reached the top of the rise, and Neil reined up the horses. "There's Warbird," he said. "What do you think of it?"

Delight stared down at the cluster of buildings, her eyes quickly focusing on the big house. "It's beautiful," she said, really meaning it. "The house, that is." She glanced aside at Neil. "Those curtains in the windows—surely there must be a woman here to keep them looking so nice." She frowned. "Your father—he hasn't remarried, has he?"

"Him?" Neil laughed, then sobered quickly. "No. I don't suppose he'll ever marry again." He touched the horses with the reins. "You're right, though, about there being a woman here. Maybe Mother mentioned Francesca."

"Oh. The Mexican servant." Delight relaxed. "I think Lucinda assumed she'd be gone by now."

Surprisingly, Neil flashed her a sharp look. "She's not just a Mexican servant, Delight. Francesca—well, Francesca's more like one of the family. You'll know what I mean in a few minutes."

"I'm sure I will." Delight folded her hands in her lap. This servant—could she possibly be a complication? Delight's eyes sharpened. Well, she knew something about women, too.

A big man was standing at the top of the steps when Neil drove up. Noting the set of his jaw, the narrowed eyes, Delight had to acknowledge a certain fear. This man had all the physical strength and vitality she had found in Neil, but there were no signs of Neil's gentleness. She met his gaze

evenly, something warning her that here was a man who would be able to see through a thin disguise.

"This is Delight DuBois," Neil said, a little defiantly. "Delight, I want you to meet my father."

The rancher nodded and came down the steps, his eyes never leaving Delight's. "Get down, Miss DuBois," he said. "We've been expecting you."

It was Delight who looked away first, a fact which she found annoying. She let Neil help her from the buggy. Holding out her hand, she said, "I've heard a lot about you, Mr. Wallace. I'm so happy to meet you."

He took her hand in his big fist and looked down at it a moment, then let it go. "If you've heard things about me, they were likely bad." He turned toward Neil. "Go on and put up the team. I'll see that Miss DuBois gets in the house."

"Thanks." Neil looked at his father speculatively a moment, then grinned at Delight. "Don't let him scare you. He's used to yelling at the crew."

He flicked the lines and headed the team toward the big barn at the far side of the yard. Delight noticed that a leathery-faced little man was sitting on a log near the barn, one bandaged leg stuck out straight in front of him. She turned and mounted the porch stairs, King Wallace a step behind.

The rancher reached past her to open the door, and waited for her to enter. He indicated a doorway into a sort of parlor. "Come in here a minute. You can go upstairs when Neil brings your grip in."

She entered the room, noticing that it was spotlessly clean, but lacking in most of the luxuries she was used to. She sat down in a straight-backed chair and smiled up at him.

King Wallace looked down at her without smiling. "We've got a couple of minutes, I reckon, before Neil gets here.

There's a few things I want to tell you." He reached in his pocket for a cigar and bit off the end, spitting it on the clean floor. Delight felt her face muscles tightening.

"You're a stranger here," he said, "but that don't mean I ain't got an idea what you're like. For one thing, you were a friend of Lucinda's. That means you like a lot of fancy things, the kind of things you won't find on Warbird."

"I don't—"

"Let me finish." King reached for a match. "That's none of my business, one way or the other. However, it tells me something else. There's got to be some reason that would make you come all the way out here, a long way from the nice things you're used to. If I know women, and I guess I do, there's only one thing that would make a woman do a thing like that—money."

Delight's heart began to pound. Either this man was a fool for luck, or he was more shrewd than she had counted on. He could ruin her plans before she was well started. Her clever brain raced. There was no use trying to fool King Wallace, she decided. All she could do was gamble. Having decided this, she unclenched her fists and smiled up at him boldly.

"If you've finished, Mr. Wallace, I have a few things to say myself."

"Go ahead." He held the match without lighting it.

She glanced quickly toward the doorway to make sure they were unobserved.

"All right, you think you're a judge of women. Maybe you are. I'm just as good a judge of men." She stood up and faced him. "Enough of a judge so that they don't scare me any more."

"Naturally, it was money that made me come to this damned awful country. And it's money that's going to keep

me here—that's going to make me marry Neil, whether you approve or not."

King was watching in astonishment, and Delight went on. "You can't stop me, because you know Neil has inherited just enough of your stubbornness so that your opposition would only make him more determined." She was becoming more sure of herself now: she raised her voice a little.

"The sensible thing would be for you to send Neil away, but that isn't what you'll do, not because he's so dear to you, but because you can't stand the idea of losing him again, for fear of what folks will say. You don't want them laughing at you again." She lowered her voice. "You see, Mr. Wallace, I know you pretty well."

She had the advantage and she pressed it.

"I'll stay here and you'll let me. No matter what you do or what you say, I'll use it against you. Before it's over, either I'll marry Neil or you'll pay me so much to leave that I'll be willing to settle." She smiled coldly. "It won't be cheap, Mr. Wallace, but you've got a choice."

Footsteps sounded from the front porch and she sat down again, her eyes not leaving King's face.

Surprisingly, the rancher started to grin. "By God, woman," he said. "You've got guts; I'll give you that." He lowered his voice as the front door opened. "But don't get the idea you're the first person I've met with guts. Or the first one to get up on his hind legs. There's more than one way—" He broke off as Neil entered the room.

"I reckon Miss DuBois wants to go to her room," King said. "She's likely tired."

Delight got to her feet and smiled at him. "Why don't you call me Delight, Mr. Wallace? It's so much friendlier."

He nodded. "Sure. We're going to be great friends."

She turned and saw Neil looking at them strangely, and

she gave him her sweetest smile. "I *would* liken to freshen up a bit, Neil, if you'll show me my room."

"Of course." He stepped back to let her pass, then followed her up the stairway to the second floor. At the head of the stairs, she waited for him to indicate which way to go, then walked at his side to the room which had been prepared for her.

"This will be yours," Neil said. "I hope you'll be comfortable here."

He stepped aside to let her enter, then followed her into the room. A woman was putting some flowers on a table. She looked around at them and smiled.

"This is Francesca," Neil said. "Francesca, this is Delight DuBois."

The Mexican woman nodded gravely. "You make us very happy, señorita."

"Thank you." Delight studied the woman expertly. Neil was right. Francesca was more than just a Mexican servant. It was evident in every line of her body, in the perfection of her features. No wonder King Wallace had kept her on the Warbird after his wife left. This woman would be one to watch out for, one who could mess up her plans.

Thinking this, and remembering that Neil was watching her closely, she crossed the room and kissed Francesca on the cheek. "We're going to be friends," she said. "I've heard so much about you, it's almost as if I already know you."

Francesca bowed ever so slightly. "*Gracias*, señorita." She smiled at Neil and crossed the room swiftly, disappearing through the doorway. Delight looked at Neil and caught him frowning.

"What's the matter, Neil?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. It's the first time I ever heard Francesca talk Mex. It just sounded sort of queer."

He put down the valise and turned toward the door. "Well, we'll be together at dinner. You'll find out I haven't exaggerated about Francesca's cooking." He grinned, and was gone.

Delight crossed the room slowly and closed the door. No, he hadn't exaggerated, but it wasn't her cooking he should have mentioned. The thought crossed Delight's mind that things might not be as easy as she had tried to make King Wallace believe.

## Chapter Nine

IT HAD BEEN Tuesday when Delight arrived at Warbird, and by Friday night Neil had been alone with her only a few minutes. King, not a subtle man at best, had been obvious in his determination that Neil should not spend much time around the ranch house. He sent him out with the crew to rebuild the dynamited dam the first thing Wednesday, and kept him there again on Thursday and Friday.

Actually, Neil didn't mind the assignment too much. Somehow, he didn't feel quite comfortable in Delight's presence, a circumstance for which he blamed himself, as Delight did everything she could to be agreeable. In addition, working on the dam gave him an outlet for some of the energy which was his by nature. It also brought him into closer contact with the Warbird crew, and he found that several of the men, in addition to Duane Forbush and Corky Brill,

who was still recuperating from his wound, were inclined to be friendly.

Flake Bridger was bossing the work, but Ace Pollock was away, having been given the job of following the trail of the dynamiter. His absence did a good deal to relieve the tension, and by Friday night the dam was practically rebuilt. To insure against further interference by the small ranchers, two men were being left on guard each night with orders to shoot first and ask questions afterward.

So it was that on Friday night, when the crew returned to the ranch, Neil was not anticipating any trouble. He was riding alongside Duane Forbush, laughing at the other puncher's dry humor, when he saw Ace Pollock sitting in the doorstep of the bunkhouse, the usual knowing grin on his face. Immediately, Neil's laughter died.

"Howdy, Ace." Flake Bridger, who was in the lead, swung down out of his saddle and dropped his reins. "I see you're back."

"I'm back." Ace got to his feet, flipping his cigarette into the dust. The rest of the crew watched him curiously, knowing about his mission.

"Well. What did you find out?" Bridger sounded impatient.

Ace shifted his holster more to the front. "He was our man, all right. I caught up with him thirty miles west of here, hidin' out in a line shack."

"Go on. Let's hear the rest of it."

Ace shrugged. "There ain't a helluva lot to tell. I called him out, and he went for his gun. I killed him."

"Without lettin' him talk?"

"Oh, he talked all right. He talked plenty." Ace looked around at the group. "We figured it right. He was Dutch's



man. Dutch gave him a hundred dollars to blow up the dam and ordered him to light out afterwards."

Bridger grinned and slapped the man on the shoulder. "Good. The boss'll be glad to hear that. Now he'll let us go after Dutch." He started toward the house.

"Just a minute." Neil stepped out of the saddle and stood watching Ace. "You say Dutch paid him a hundred dollars. That doesn't sound like the kind of money the Dutchman would be passing around."

"Well, by God, that's what he did this time!" Ace said truculently.

Neil nodded. "Then I reckon he still had it on him. He didn't have much chance to get rid of it with you on his tail all the time."

Ace's lips thinned and his eyes squinted. "You wouldn't be calling me a liar, would you, Wallace?"

Neil had not intended to carry it this far, but he was satisfied that the gunman was lying and equally satisfied that it had gone past the point where either could back down. Already the other punchers were edging out of the way. He moved a little to one side so that the house wouldn't be at his back.

"Since you mention it, Ace, something like that did cross my mind." He felt no fear, only regret for what was going to happen.

"Why, you damn—"

"Hold it, you two!" Bridger stepped between them, his gun fisted. "There ain't going to be any fights around here as long as I'm ramrodding this outfit!" He turned toward Ace; a look passed between them. "Let it drop, Ace. Neil was only askin' a question."

Surprised, Neil stared at Bridger's back. Struck by a sudden thought, he turned toward the house. His father

was on the porch, his hand still on the door latch. Had Bridger noticed him before he interfered? There was no way of knowing.

The tension eased and the men went on to the horse barn. Neil went with them, took the gear off his horse and rubbed it down, then went to the wash bench and splashed water on his face. Nobody seemed to feel like talking and he turned and cut across the yard toward the house. His father was still standing on the porch.

"What happened out there?" he demanded.

Neil shrugged. "Nothing. Ace says he found Dutch's rider and killed him. He claims the man admitted that Dutch paid him to dynamite the dam."

"I already knew that. I was talking about—" King shrugged. "Let it go."

Neil passed him and crossed the hall to the dining room. Delight was already at the table and she looked up at him and smiled, gesturing toward the chair at her side.

Neil, moved by some perverse impulse, pretended not to notice the gesture, and seated himself across the table. Noticing her look, he was immediately sorry, and said lamely, "You wouldn't want to eat next to a horse and that's what I smell like. I've been in the saddle most of the day."

"I wouldn't care." She smiled at him as if nothing had happened. "Just as long as you're here." She frowned prettily. "I get bored, idling around all day, with you gone."

King crossed the room and sat down at the head of the table. "A rancher's life ain't all velvet, Delight. He's got to get the work done." He looked at her without smiling. "Same thing goes for a rancher's woman. She's got to expect to be alone a lot."

"I suppose so. I didn't mean to complain, Mr. Wallace. It's just that I'm not used to being away from everything."

She seemed really unhappy and Neil felt a tug of sympathy. Probably it had been hard he thought, for a girl to be stuck here on Warbird all day without any form of amusement. His father shouldn't use that critical tone.

Delight smiled at him-across the table, telling him it was all right, but he still wasn't pleased with the way things were going. Without stopping to think about it much, he said, "There's a dance in town tomorrow, Delight. Maybe you'd like to go."

Her eyes sparkled and she said animatedly, "I'd love it. I'd just love it!"

Once again, things seemed to have gotten away from him. Neil looked at his father, expecting some opposition, but the rancher smiled. "A good idea, Neil. It'll show them ranchers we ain't afraid of what they think."

He hadn't thought of it that way. Going to a dance in town would be asking for trouble. Taking Delight along to show her off before the local citizens would make it worse. But he couldn't very well back down now. He grinned. "It won't be boring, anyway. I'll guarantee you that, Delight."

Francesca brought in their plates and they finished the meal without much more conversation, Delight apparently busy with her plans for the next night, and Neil feeling depressed. As they got up from the table, King said bluntly, "I want you to stay at the dam tonight, Neil. I don't trust some of those men of Bridger's."

Neil smothered a protest. He had agreed to take orders, and this was an order. He looked at Delight, who raised her eyebrows in sympathy.

"Tomorrow morning, take the buckboard and go to town for some dynamite," King went on. "We'll be needing it to bust out that last piece of dirt at the end of the ditch."

"You're that near through?"

The rancher grinned. "That near," he said. "It's just a matter of a day or so now."

Neil knew what it meant. With the ditch open, all the undercurrents of hatred would be out in the open. He thought about Will Turner and about Marcia.

"I'll be on my way," he said, getting to his feet. "See you tomorrow, Delight." He hurried out of the house and headed for the barn.

Corky Brill hailed him from beside the bunkhouse door. "What's itchin' *you*, son?"

Neil grinned. "The same thing that'd be itchin' you if you had to go on night guard after workin' all day."

Corky spat in the dust. "What the blazes! There's plenty of men around here that ain't done a decent day's work. Why don't he send Ace Pollock?"

Neil shrugged. "Ask him," he said. "Well, watch yourself." He continued on to the barn, saddled a horse, and took off for the dam.

In spite of King's worry, the night passed uneventfully. At dawn, others of the crew showed up to take over, and Neil rode wearily back to the ranch. He ate breakfast at the cookshack, then went into the bunkhouse and threw himself on an unused bunk. When he awoke, the crew had left, all except Corky, who was sitting in the doorway.

"Thought I'd ride herd on you," he said. "There's some around here would just as soon stick a knife in your back as not."

"Thanks." Neil cuffed him on the side of the head. "How's the leg?"

"Comin' along fine," Corky said. "I'll be back in the saddle in a day or so."

"You try it and I'll break your neck," Neil said. He crossed the yard, hitched a team to the buckboard, and drove around

to the ranch house door. King heard the gravel rattling and came out on the porch.

"Be sure to get enough," he said. "We want to do this right." He rubbed his chin. "Sutherland's is the place to go. Tell him to charge it."

Neil nodded without answering and turned the team toward town. They fell into a steady trot, and a little before noon he tied them in front of Sutherland's Mercantile. Turkey Sutherland stood watching him from the doorway.

"You'll be Neil Wallace," he said. "Come in." There was neither pleasure nor displeasure in his voice.

"That's right," Neil said, "I remember you, Mr. Sutherland." He entered the store, which held no other customers. "We need some dynamite and a few feet of fuse."

"Dynamite?" The storekeeper hesitated, his long red neck twisted to one side. "That sounds like trouble, and I don't like trouble."

"Who does?" Neil grinned. "Anyway, that's what I'm here for."

The storekeeper shrugged. "All right. I'm in business to make a living, so I'll sell dynamite the same as I would anything else. I just wish it was wallpaper or whitewash you was needin'." He went into the back room and came out with a box which he set on the counter. "Maybe you're just going to use it to blow out stumps."

"Maybe." Neil picked up the box and headed for the doorway. Before reaching it, he turned. "I suppose they still have the dances at the schoolhouse?"

"They do." The merchant looked up sharply. "You ain't figgerin' on comin' in?"

"Why not?" Neil looked at him with amusement.

"Nothin'. Like I said, I don't like trouble. That's all."

Neil continued on to the street and placed the dynamite

on the floor of the buckboard. He backed the team and headed them toward Warbird. Cal Mulholland raised a hand in greeting, and Neil waved back without speaking. When he reached the ranch some time later, his father came out to meet him.

"Should have told you to take it over to Stubblefield's," he said. "That's a safer place for it right now and closer to where we'll be using it."

Neil knew it was a ruse to keep him away from the ranch, but he turned the buggy without questioning King's motive. Trouble would come soon enough without making an issue out of something as small as this. He drove back over the hump to the main road and turned right, heading for Box-S, where he found Stubby repairing a corral. The little man very evidently was worried about the dynamite, but he showed Neil where to store it, carefully avoiding the subject both of them were thinking about.

Neil soon left Box-S and arrived back at Warbird as the cook pounded on the iron triangle to announce supper. Since he didn't have time to clean up, he ate in the bunkhouse, then got his razor and began getting ready for the dance. All the crew seemed to know his intentions and they watched him speculatively, so he was glad when it was time to hitch up the buggy and drive around to the front steps, where Delight was waiting.

Delight's excitement was such that Neil couldn't help getting a little excited himself, although he had reason to believe that this trip to town wouldn't be the unmixed pleasure she seemed to expect it to be. By the time they reached the schoolhouse they were laughing and enjoying themselves. Delight had taken special pains to make herself even more attractive than usual; she was wearing some tantalizing perfume that reminded him of Christmas in St. Louis.

He tied the team to a tree near the schoolhouse, where several others were already standing, lifted Delight out of the buggy, and guided her up onto the porch. The marshal was lounging against the front of the building and he looked up and nodded, seeming a little surprised and a little embarrassed. Probably remembering the way King had humiliated him in the center of the main street a few days before, Neil decided.

"Evening, marshal," Neil said. He turned toward his companion. "This is Delight DuBois, who's visiting Warbird."

The marshal touched his hat. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, ma'am." He looked at Neil's gun. "I guess you'll remember to check your iron."

"Sure, marshal." Neil led Delight into the hall, which was already half filled. He unbuckled his gunbelt and handed it to a stranger who had quite a number of guns hanging on nails behind him.

"Name, mister?"

"Wallace. Neil Wallace."

The man started. "Not— He broke off and turned to hang the gunbelt on another nail.

Delight immediately became the center of interest, and it was obvious that the attention pleased her. Neil looked around at the others in the room, most of whom were staring in his direction. He didn't encounter a friendly glance although plenty of the men were looking at Delight with poorly concealed admiration. As he turned back toward Delight, Frederick Davenport entered the room, immaculately dressed as usual. He nodded at the man behind the check counter.

"Never wear a gun," he said pleasantly. "I wouldn't know how to use one." He smiled at Neil and bowed to Delight.

"You're looking lovely, Miss DuBois. It isn't often we have

the chance of meeting an Eastern beauty here in Kingvale.

Delight was plainly flattered. "Just for that, you may have the second dance." She looked at Neil. "I presume Neil will ask for the first."

Neil grinned. "I'd like to see anybody else try to get it."

The music started then, and he put his arm around Delight and swung her out onto the floor. For a moment it appeared that nobody else was going to join them, then Davenport spoke to one of the girls by the door and whirled her into the dance. After that, others swung their partners onto the floor.

After the first dance, Neil found himself standing on the sidelines. Whatever resentment Kingvale felt against the Wallaces, it didn't keep them from crowding around Delight. Neil asked one or two girls to dance but was refused, and he soon realized that there was a tacit agreement to ignore him. It didn't bother him especially until late in the evening, when Marcia Turner entered the room, accompanied by a redheaded cowboy. She didn't see Neil at first, and he stood watching her, strangely moved by her clean young beauty. He remembered their encounter in the hayloft and felt the blood pounding in his temples.

She looked at him presently and didn't turn away, but there was no welcome in her glance, so he knew she was still remembering about Delight. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter, but he knew it was a lie. He turned aside to see what had become of Delight, and when he looked back Marcia was gone. His eyes searched for her on the floor and he found her dancing with the redhead, apparently having a good time. He threaded his way through the dancers and stepped out onto the porch, where Cal Mulholland was still standing.

"A nice night," the marshal said.



"Wonderful," Neil said. "Just wonderful."

The marshal laughed softly. "Don't let it throw you, cowboy. We all have our troubles."

He sounded so grim that Neil glanced at him sharply. "What's *your* trouble, marshal?"

The marshal frowned. "Me—that's my trouble." He shrugged. "Well, what the hell?" He walked to the other end of the porch.

Somebody came out the door and Neil turned to see the redheaded cowboy looking at him. "You Neil Wallace?"

Neil nodded, setting himself for trouble.

"She sent you a message. Says to ask her to dance."

"She?"

"Marcia Turner. Don't ask me why. She just told me to find you."

"Thanks." Neil watched the man go back into the schoolhouse. This could be a trick, but it was worth investigating. He followed the redhead and saw Marcia standing not far from the door, talking to Frederick Davenport. He crossed over and faced her.

"May I have the next dance?"

"Certainly." She pulled at Davenport. "Excuse me, please."

The music started, and Neil put his arm around her cautiously, still not quite convinced that her invitation had been sincere.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Don't look so grim, Neil. I seldom bite anybody in public."

He tightened his arm, drawing her closer. "You're taking quite a chance, being seen with a Wallace. We're about as popular as skunks at a church social."

"I know." She resisted the pressure of his arm, keeping her distance. "I wanted to talk to you, though, and this seemed the only way I could do it. It's about what happened

the other morning. I'm afraid I wasn't exactly fair." She lowered her voice. "I found out about how you kept your father and his men from coming to the barn that day. I'm sorry for what I said."

Other couples were circling around them, but he was oblivious to everyone but Marcia. "There's nothing to be sorry for, Marcia. I'm just glad you found out the truth. Now we can be friends."

She shook her head. "I'm afraid we can't, Neil. Not when we're on opposite sides of the fence. It's just that I lost my temper the other day, and it's been bothering me." She glanced across the room, to where Delight was dancing with one of the ranchers. "And I want to tell you that you've got a beautiful girl. I don't blame you now for wanting her to stay."

Neil's brief elation faded. It had come to him that Marcia was the girl he'd always love, but mention of Delight reminded him that he wasn't free to speak his mind. "Thank you," he said. "I hope—"

The music ended, and he returned her to the doorway, where she was claimed by the redhead. Neil turned to see Delight waiting for him, her eyes bright.

"This is the last dance, mister," she said. "You haven't forgotten me?"

"No ma'am," he said. "I don't reckon anybody else will, either." He put his arm around her as the music started up.

The dance ended, and couples began drifting out the doorway. Neil gave Delight his arm and led her to where the buggy had been tied, then stopped in surprise. The buggy was gone. He remembered positively that this was the tree to which the team had been tied, so somebody must have moved it.

"A dumb trick," he said, not yet beginning to get angry.

"Come back to the porch and I'll leave you there while I get a rig from the livery." He took her to the porch, where the marshal was still standing. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'll be all right." Already she was talking to some man who had been one of her dancing partners. Neil took off toward the livery stable.

The liveryman, a shifty-eyed man whom Neil remembered, shook his head. "Ain't a buggy in the place," he said. "I'm sorry, Wallace, but that's the truth."

Something about his way of speaking gave Neil the idea that this speech had been rehearsed. It seemed too pat. He took the man by the shoulder.

"You're likely in on this damn fool trick, Hooper, but I ain't got time for jokes right now. I've got a lady waiting at the schoolhouse. Either find a buggy or I'll wipe that silly grin off your face."

The liveryman swallowed painfully. "That ain't no way to talk, Wallace. You got no call to accuse me."

"Get a buggy," Neil said bluntly, shoving the man away from him.

"I'll see what I can find." The liveryman scurried away, going out the back of the barn. In a few minutes he came back leading a horse and buggy.

"It's the only one I could find," he said. "Now don't go gettin'—"

"It'll do." Neil took the lines and stepped into the buggy. He slapped them across the horse's rump, and the animal moved into a sluggish trot. The liveryman watched him, his eyes angry.

The crowd around the schoolhouse had thinned, but Delight was not in sight. Neil tied the horse and stepped up onto the porch, where Marshal Mulholland still waited. The marshal took a cigar out of his mouth.

"She's gone on home. Flake Bridger was in town, and he found where they'd hid the buggy so he brought it by, figgerin' you'd be lookin' for it. Seein' you wasn't here, she decided to go on to Warbird with him." He waved at the last couple to leave.

Neil nodded, his face a mask. "In that case, I'll find Bridger's horse, and take this rig back to the livery." His voice was flat, but he was boiling inside. Either Bridger had been a part of this conspiracy, or he had been mighty quick to take advantage of it.

The marshal laid a hand on his shoulder. "I don't like that look in your eyes, son. I've seen it in other men." He let his hand fall. "Don't pay any attention to me, though. Nobody else does any more."

In spite of his anger, Neil's interest was aroused. "Maybe they would," he suggested, "if you'd quit taking orders from Warbird."

The marshal nodded gloomily. "I reckon I've gone too far for that, son." He dropped his cigar and stamped on it. "Well, use your own judgement."

As he had surmised, Neil found Bridger's horse at the hitch rail in front of Diamond's saloon. He swung into the saddle and led the harness horse back to the livery, where he handed the reins to Kansas Hooper, who still looked mad, then headed for Warbird. Somewhere on the road ahead, Flake Bridger was laughing about all this. He wondered if Delight would be joining in the laughter. He tried to imagine Marcia Turner riding off and leaving her partner in such a situation; he couldn't quite make it seem real. He touched his spurs to the horse's flanks, and it broke into a gallop.

The road to Warbird was empty, so he knew the buggy had gotten there ahead of him. When he led Bridger's horse

into the barn, the foreman was just finishing stripping harness from the team. He looked at Neil and grinned.

"Figured you wouldn't want the lady to wait out in the cold," he said. "I hope you don't mind."

Neil was determined not to start trouble if he could help it, so he said, "Skip it. If she wanted to come on home, that's her business."

The foreman hung up the harness and stood looking at him, his grin indicating that he had interpreted Neil's mild answer as being inspired by fear. "That's right nice of you, Neil. It ain't every day I get a chance to buggy-ride a pretty gal like her." He laughed, and winked meaningfully. "Buggy ride. By God, that ain't a bad idea. With that little—"

Neil hit him, his fist catching Bridger on the side of the forehead. The foreman went over backwards, but rolled into a somersault which brought him up on his feet, agile as a cat.

"So you want it that way," he said thinly. "All right, by God, I've been waitin' a long time for this."

He charged at Neil, his chin lowered inside the crook of his left arm.

Neil swung a savage left fist, but it glanced off the foreman's shoulder. At the same time, lightning exploded against Neil's jaw, sending him spinning. He caromed off the side of a stall and fell on his back. As he shook his head, Bridger sprang toward him, his bootheels aimed for Neil's stomach. Neil whirled out of the way by a matter of inches and grabbed one ankle in his right hand, jerking it savagely. Bridger tripped and slid along the rough floor on the side of his face. By this time, horses were snorting and kicking the sides of the stalls.

"Come on," Neil said, getting to his feet. "Let's try that again." He was calm, now that the waiting was over. "There's

just the two of us now, Bridger. Let's see how big a man you really are."

Bridger growled deep in his throat and waded in. They stood toe to toe, their fists pounding each other soggily. Neil's head was heavy, and blood was running down his chin, but he could see that Bridger was in even worse shape, one side of his face raw from sliding on the floor. The knowledge gave him added strength, and he buried his fist in Bridger's stomach. The foreman sagged to his knees.

"Break it up, you crazy fools!"

Neil turned wearily and saw his father watching from the doorway. King's face was red with anger, but there was a strange light in his eyes as he looked from Neil to the man on the floor. Almost a look of satisfaction. Then he said sharply, "Get in the house, boy. There ain't no sense in fightin' among ourselves this way."

Neil staggered past him toward the house, wiping blood from his face. Behind him, he heard Bridger cursing softly.

## Chapter Ten

KING WALLACE was up the next morning at his usual time, in spite of its being a Sunday, when the Warbird crew, except for those on guard at the dam, would be loafing around the ranch. He had slept poorly after breaking up the fight between Neil and the foreman, and was in an ugly mood as he stomped down the stairs and headed for the dining room. When he found the room untenanted his irritation increased,

and he yelled loudly for Francesca, who came immediately from the kitchen, her face grave.

"Where the devil is everybody?" he demanded sourly. "You know I don't like to eat alone."

Francesca looked a little surprised, and this aggravated him further, as he knew her surprise was justified, since he frequently ate by himself from choice. "Well, don't just stare at me," he snapped. "Get some grub. At least there'll be two of us."

Francesca returned to the kitchen, and came back presently with one plate of food, which she put at King's place. King glowered at her.

"I've already eaten," she said. "I guess Neil and Miss DuBois must be sleepy after the dance."

She turned and walked back into the kitchen while King frowned at her back, seeking an outlet for his temper, but realizing that he couldn't very well make her eat a second breakfast. He picked up his fork, then slammed it down on the table. By God, if Delight was going to eat his food, the least she could do was get down to the table at a decent hour. He shoved back his chair and strode across the hall, taking the stairs two at a time. Without stopping to consider the consequences, he banged on Delight's door.

"Come alive in there! It's breakfast time."

Delight mumbled something sleepily, and King's anger mounted. Damned Eastern hussy. Acting like she owned the place. He tried the door, which was unlocked, and pushed it open.

Delight was lying in bed, watching him drowsily. "Go away," she said. "It's hardly daylight." She pulled the covers over her head and turned to face the wall.

Something besides anger began to stir King's emotions.

"Get up, damn it!" he said, and reached out to yank the covers off the bed.

Delight was wearing a sheer nightgown which offered little protection from King's suddenly hungry eyes. The rancher backed off a step, his jaw slack. "My God!" he said softly, and wiped a hand across his mouth.

The girl stared back at him insolently. "Maybe you never saw a real woman before," she said, not showing any sign of embarrassment. "Maybe you're used to those flat-chested drudges I saw at the dance last night." She put her feet on the floor and stood up, the gown clinging to her body. "All right, now you've seen one—get out."

King licked his lips and reached for her. "Don't order me around in my own house, woman." He grabbed her shoulders roughly and pulled her toward him.

She pretended to resist, but he crushed her tight against him, their bodies touching. King sucked in his breath. This was Neil's girl, but King was used to taking what he wanted. "God!" he said. "You're too much woman for a boy like Neil. He wouldn't know how to handle you."

She had quit resisting now and he pulled her face up to his, kissing her roughly. She returned the pressure for a moment, then twisted away. "Don't you think you ought to close the door?" she asked calmly.

Across the hall, Neil stirred uneasily as he heard King's loud voice. He opened his eyes and rolled over, every muscle of his body aching as a result of the fight with Bridger. His father's voice came to him across the hall, bringing him fully awake. He got out of bed and opened the door a crack, then froze as he saw Delight and his father facing each other in Delight's bedroom. Anger flooded his brain and he started to open the door. It occurred to him



how silly he'd look if he burst out in his underclothes, and he turned to grab his pants off a chair. When he had pulled them on and opened the door, he saw Delight and his father in a fierce embrace, and it stopped him short. Unbelievably, he heard Delight say, "Don't you think you ought to close the door?"

Neil sank down heavily on the edge of the bed. At the moment he could have killed his father without compunction, but as his thoughts began to straighten out he realized that Delight had seemed fully co-operative. It came to him suddenly that he had been a fool—that Delight's seeming innocence had been only a masquerade. After a bit he began to smile. Maybe King had done him a favor. Suppose he had married Delight, and found out *afterwards* what sort of woman she was.

By the time he finished dressing, he felt only relief. That torrid scene in Delight's bedroom had done more than open his eyes—it had made him a free man again. Now he was no longer bound by his agreement with his father, nor was he in danger of being tricked into marriage with Delight. A thought hit him suddenly, and he stood perfectly still. He could even speak openly to Marcia.

Throwing his extra things into the warbag, he picked it up and crossed the hallway quietly, then went down the stairs and out into the yard. In his *present* mood he didn't want to see anyone, so he went directly to the horse barn, tossed his warbag in a corner, then saddled a horse and led it out into the open. Nobody had appeared when he rode out of the place and headed for town.

Neil had left the ranch with no particular plan, but as he crossed the hogback and started down the other side it occurred to him that he was hungry. The restaurant would be closed, since it was Sunday. The hotel could probably

provide him with breakfast, but that might involve meeting some of the small ranchers, and he didn't want to risk such an encounter until he had thought things out and decided what he was going to do. Then he remembered Frederick Davenport's cordiality at the dance, and decided to accept the Englishman's invitation to come and see him. He followed the main road to Davenport's turn-off, and rode in.

The Englishman heard him and came to the door. "Come in," he said pleasantly. "I've been hoping you'd find time to drop by."

"Thanks." Neil dismounted and tied his horse to a fence post, then followed Davenport into the kitchen. He grinned. "I've come begging, Davenport. I don't suppose you'd happen to have an extra mug of coffee?"

Davenport smiled. "It just so happens there's a pot on the stove and you're welcome to all you can drink." He looked at Neil a little sheepishly. "The cook stayed in town last night after the dance, so I was about to get my own breakfast. I'm the world's worst cook, but if you're willing to take a chance, I'd be glad to have you join me."

"You've talked me into it," Neil said. "Anyway, there isn't much you can do to spoil a couple of eggs."

Davenport laughed. "Just wait and see." He began fumbling with a skillet while Neil watched him casually. "I suppose you're wondering how anybody can be so clumsy around a stove," he said, turning.

Neil shook his head. "No. To tell the truth, I was wondering how a man with your obvious background happened to drift to a place like Wyoming."

Davenport nodded. "I sometimes wonder myself. I suppose it's because I like the freedom of this land—the lack of conventions." He gestured toward the east, and Neil knew

that he was thinking of his homeland. "Too much protocol, too many kings."

Neil took a drink of the coffee, which was bitter. "We have a few folks out here in Wyoming who like power, too," he said. "Doesn't that bother you any?"

The Englishman frowned. "You mean like your father. Yes, it does bother me, Neil. That's why I'm willing to throw what little weight I have on the side of the small ranchers." He smiled. "After all, that's all I am, just a small rancher, running what your father calls a two-bit ranch. I suppose he's right, but to my mind it's my castle just as much as Warbird is his." He looked at Neil thoughtfully. "I'm speaking plainly because I have a feeling that you don't share your father's opinion on everything." He chuckled. "Here. After you try to eat these eggs, you may wish I'd stayed in England."

Neil laughed, and took the plate Davenport offered him. "Shucks. What's the matter with burned eggs? I always cook 'em the same way myself." He set down the plate and went to work, quickly cleaning it.

For a few moments they were quiet, then Davenport said seriously, "Don't get the impression that I think your father is entirely wrong, and the small fellows entirely right. There's at least one on our side who strikes me as having his own interests in mind more than the welfare of the group. You may know the man I mean."

"Hub Talbert?"

Davenport nodded. "He impresses me as having his own ax to grind. He talks big, but he always manages to stay in the background when there's any danger." He stood up, picking up Neil's plate. "Let me get you some more."

"No, thanks." Neil got to his feet. "You're really a good cook, Davenport. I'd give you a job any day if I had a ranch of my own."

The Englishman made a little bow. "I'll remember that." He dropped the dishes in a dishpan. "Maybe you'd care to look around the place." He frowned and looked at his watch. "I'd like to ask you to spend the day with me, but I promised Will Turner I'd come over to his place before noon, so maybe we'd better make our tour of inspection right now."

"Fine." Neil picked up his hat and followed the Englishman out the door, listening to his comments about the little ranch. The man was friendly and polite, but Neil could see that he was uneasy about the appointment with Will Turner, so he thanked him again for the breakfast and left at about nine-thirty.

As he rode away, Neil wondered why Will Turner would be conferring with Davenport. The Englishman was one of the smallest ranchers, and it seemed odd that they would have anything to discuss, particularly anything important enough to call for a special appointment on Sunday. Unless it was a general meeting.

With that thought in mind, he rode out past Broken Bow, then circled back and tied his horse behind a brush patch where he could watch the road. While he was watching, Marcia came out of the house and filled a bucket at the pump. He wanted to call out, but felt a little guilty to be spying, so watched her in silence.

After a few more minutes, a group of ranchers rode up to the place and turned in. Neil recognized Hub Talbert in the group. A couple of the others looked familiar, but he couldn't recall their names. A moment later Frederick Davenport rode up and dismounted. They all went into the house.

Neil returned to his horse, turning the matter over in his mind. Apparently the ranchers had learned about his trip to town for dynamite and were smart enough to figure out

that King was about to complete his project. Equally obvious, this meeting had been called for the purpose of planning a countermove. At the moment, he couldn't think what it might be.

As he rode toward Warbird, Neil puzzled about the meeting, and what its outcome would be. It seemed unlikely that the ranchers would attempt to blow up the dam again, since it involved possible bloodshed, which would hardly be justified for the purpose of delaying things another week or so. He tried to put himself in their place, and finally came to the conclusion that their best bet would be to get control of Box-S, on which San Juan Creek had its origin.

If they could hold Box-S, they had a chance of thwarting King's plans.

Neil pulled up in the shade of a tree and got down to sit with his back against the rough trunk, while his horse grazed nearby. He was in an odd situation, now that he was free from his promise to King, since the small ranchers would certainly refuse to trust him, assuming that he might be trying to trick them into revealing their plans. About all he could do was work alone, trying to prevent things from coming to a slaughter.

He shook his head grimly. Even Stubby would distrust him if he went there with the truth. He was almost convinced that Stubby's spread would be the ranchers' target, but if he went to Box-S with such a story, Stubby's first move would be to tell King, who would then set up an ambush and wipe them out, the last thing Neil wanted. That left only one alternative. He could try to warn Stubby in time so that he could protect himself, but not in time to get the Warbird crew into the fight.

Neil got to his feet, not pleased with his plan, but unable

to think of a better one. He mounted his horse and turned it toward Warbird, hating to return, but knowing he had to show up or arouse suspicion.

## Chapter Eleven

WARBIRD lay deceptively peaceful in the midday sun when Neil crossed the plateau and turned his horse toward the cluster of buildings. A couple of wranglers were moving a bunch of saddle horses from the barn to the corral, while others were waiting to rope out fresh mounts to be put into the barn in their places. They turned to watch him ride in, and he knew from their expressions that they had heard about his fight with Bridger, or at least had heard Bridger's version.

He took care of his mount, then picked up his warbag from where he had left it in the barn, and cut across to the bunkhouse, not wanting to encounter the foreman but not wanting to appear to be avoiding him either. As he entered the rock building, Corky Brill looked up from one of the bunks.

"So you ain't dead after all," he said. "From the way Bridger told it, I figured you might've gone off and died." He turned gingerly in the bunk and put his feet on the floor. "Come over here and let me take a look at that ugly mug of yours."

From Corky's tone, Neil realized that the foreman was not within hearing distance. He tossed his warbag onto a bunk and crossed to face Corky. The little puncher gave him

a careful scrutiny, then grinned. "Hell, you ain't bad at all. Not half as bad as Bridger." He got to his feet, wincing a little. "From the looks of his face, you must've dragged him all the way from town."

Neil grinned. "Maybe his razor slipped. I sure didn't mean to mar his manly beauty."

Corky snorted. "You marred more than his beauty, man—you bruised his delicate feelings. Nobody else ever gave him a licking before, at least not since he came to Warbird." He dropped his voice. "It ain't no joke, son. He'll get you any way he can—him or his sidekick Ace."

Neil smiled grimly. "Chances are he was aiming to do that anyway. He's not a very neighborly cuss." He looked around the room. "By the way, I didn't see him around just now. Him or Ace Pollock either."

The puncher shrugged. "They both rode off right after breakfast. Didn't bother to say where they was going, but I reckon they're over at the dam." He began building a cigarette. "About Bridger bein' unneighborly. I reckon it's because he thought he had a chance of gettin' his fingers on Warbird some day. With you back, he don't stand much likelihood."

"Tell him to quit worrying about it, Corky. I won't be here long."

The puncher looked up at him quickly. "You mean you're pullin' out? What happened?"

"A personal matter. You'll likely find out about it in time." Neil crossed the room and sat down on the bunk where he had put his gear. "Any sign of anyone from the big house yet today?"

"Nope." Corky hobbled across to the doorway. "They're all over there, unless they left on foot. Nobody's taken a horse

out this morning." He eased himself down on the doorstep. "You fixin' to take a snooze?"

Neil nodded. "Between standing guard Friday night and going to the dance last night, I'm a little behind on my sleep." He shucked off his shirt and fell back onto the bunk, feeling some of the tenseness drain out of him.

"I'll be right here," Corky said. "Just in case any friends come to call."

"Thanks." Neil closed his eyes and began to doze. A swarm of bees was humming somewhere near, and there was a gentle sighing of wind through the trees. In a few minutes he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

When he awoke, the slanting sunlight across the floor told him it was late afternoon. He raised his head from the pillow and saw that Corky was still on guard, and he smiled. Corky was too good a man to receive the treatment he was getting from King. By rights he ought to be foreman again. His smile faded as he remembered that it was none of his business. He'd be away from Warbird as soon as he accomplished one more thing.

The little puncher heard him moving, and turned to look. "It's about time," he said grumpily. "You really must've been all in."

Neil put his feet on the floor and stretched the kinks out of his arms. "Anything happen while I was asleep, Corky?"

"Nothin' to get excited about. King came out of the house about three o'clock and rode off toward the dam. He ain't come back yet."

Neil stood up and reached in his warbag for a razor. Before he left the ranch, he wanted to see Francesca again and offer her his help in case she ever needed it. The episode in Delight's bedroom was indication enough that there wouldn't be room for the two women here on Warbird



much longer. Besides talking with Francesca, he had to let Delight know his intentions. He left the bunkhouse and crossed over to the washstand and began to shave, handling the razor carefully on account of the damaged condition of his face.

When he finished, he took the razor back into the bunkhouse and put on a clean shirt, then went out into the yard again. Corky had moved to the shade of a tree and was looking at him soberly.

"Good luck, son," he said. "Whatever you're up to."

"Thanks." Neil crossed the yard and went up the wide steps.

There was nobody downstairs, so Neil went through the kitchen and climbed the back steps. He rapped softly on Francesca's door. There was no answer, but he heard what seemed to be sobbing from inside the room. He opened the door quietly and saw that Francesca was lying across the bed, her shoulders shaking.

Deeply disturbed, he closed the door as quietly as he could, but she must have heard him, because she asked suddenly, "Who's there?"

"It's me." Neil waited a moment, then opened the door again. "I wanted to talk with you before I left."

She had gotten to her feet and was holding a handkerchief to her eyes. When she took it away, she was trying to smile. "Come in, Neil. I shouldn't act this way."

He entered the room, feeling awkward. When he started to lay his hat on the bed she reached out as though to stop him, then let her hand fall. "Go on, it doesn't matter."

He must have looked puzzled, for she explained wryly, "There's a superstition that it's unlucky to throw a hat on the bed, but it isn't important now." She sat on the edge of the bed and motioned for Neil to sit facing her on a chair.

"You said something about leaving. Are you going away again?"

"I am." Neil could read the misery in Francesca's eyes. "Maybe you ought to leave, too. You don't seem very happy here any more." He smiled, meaning to reassure her. "You know you don't have to stay if you don't want to. I'm not rich, but I still have a good job I can go back to and I'm sure the folks back there would make you welcome. I'd be glad to pay them, but they'd be insulted."

She reached out and took his hand. "You're kind, Neil. So different from your father in lots of ways." She looked at him soberly. "What about Miss DuBois? Does she know about this?"

Neil's lips thinned. "Miss DuBois will get along all right. She can take care of herself."

Francesca nodded. "Yes. She'll be all right. I found that out this morning."

Neil looked up quickly. Her doorway, he realized suddenly, faced Delight's bedroom the same as his did. The realization disgusted him.

Francesca released his hand. "Thank you, Neil, but I'll never leave Warbird. Not after all these years." She got up and walked over to the window. "You probably know what your father means to me. I thought he felt the same, until word came about your mother. I guess I've been a fool."

Neil wanted to say something, but no words came to his lips. He crossed over and stood behind her, looking across her shoulder at the ranch yard below. He touched her shoulder and she turned.

"I've thought it all over, Neil, and made up my mind. I'm going to stay. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's my decision."

"Then it's all right with me," Neil said. "For my money, you're solid gold."

She smiled. "Go now. Go before it's too late. There's nothing for you on Warbird. Don't even stop to say good-bye. You might change your mind."

He picked up his hat. "I'll go, Francesca. Don't worry about my changing my mind." He turned in the doorway. "The thing that happened this morning—I saw it too." He closed the door and went down the hall.

Delight called to him from her bedroom. "Wait a minute, Neil. I've been wondering where you were."

She sounded the same as ever, and Neil cursed under his breath, remembering with a shock that she didn't know that anything had changed. He waited at the top of the stairs until she came out into the hall, smiling at him innocently. When she came close and started to take his arm, he pulled away. Her smile became brittle.

"What's the matter, Neil? You act angry. Has something happened?"

He wanted to smash his fist in her pretty face, but it wasn't worth the trouble. "Come here," he said, and walked to the doorway of his room.

She followed him, frowning. He turned her roughly in the doorway and pointed toward her bedroom door. "You might at least have seen if anybody was watching," he said. "Or don't folks care back in St. Louis?"

Her face whitened and she stared at him a moment, her mouth drawn into an ugly line. Then she began to laugh mockingly. "You poor fool" she said. "Do you think it makes any difference to me?" She backed into the hall, her laughter shrill. "I don't need you any more—I'm going to have your father. At least he's man enough to take what he wants." There were red spots on her cheeks and she had to hold onto the railing to keep from falling. "Go back to your mealy-mouthed little Marcia. I've got what I was after."

"I'd go to her if she'd have me," Neil said. He passed Delight and went down the stairs. As he reached the doorway, his father came up the porch steps. When he saw Neil, he stopped. "What's all the hollering?"

"Just Delight," Neil said. "Something struck her funny." He paused, facing the rancher. "She'll likely tell you all about it if you ask her. Don't forget to close the door, though." He started to pass the other man. "By the way, our agreement's off and you can send Delight away—if you think you can make her go. I'm leaving Warbird."

King reached out and grabbed his arm. "Hold on! What's this about leaving? You can't—"

Neil jerked his sleeve loose. "Don't tell me what I can do. You've bossed people so long you've even fooled yourself. It's like Dutch said, you think you're God Almighty." He hadn't intended to say so much, but his anger prodded him on. "One of these times, you're going to find out you've overstepped yourself. Don't expect me to cry about it."

King's fist lashed out and caught Neil in the mouth. "Go then, damn it! You ain't any son of mine, you chicken-livered whelp." His eyes blazed. "You poor fool. You stood to inherit this ranch, but I'll fix that as soon as I get to town."

Neil waited for him to go on, but the rancher was through. "I'm taking a horse," Neil said. "I'll leave it at the livery stable." He licked blood from his lips. Suddenly he felt no anger. Everything was over now and he was glad. He crossed to the bunkhouse for his warbag, nodded at Corky, and went on to the barn. He threw his saddle on a bay mare and rode out of the barn.

There was one more thing he had to do—warn Stubby about the ranchers. That would have to wait until dark. He rode up the hogback without looking back.

There was hardly time to go to town and get back to

Stubblefield's place by dark, so Neil pulled up his belt a notch and turned his horse off the road toward the Box-S. He didn't want to be seen by anybody who might report his actions to King, but there was an abandoned line-shack where he had played as a boy and where he should be able to hole up until it was dark enough to venture out.

He found the shack, badly weathered but still serviceable, and tied his horse in the little lean-to stable at one side. A good deal of brush had grown up around the place so he felt that it was safe. He sat down with his back against the building, wanting a cigarette but not making one for fear someone might smell the smoke.

In half an hour the sun dropped behind the horizon, and objects began to lose their shapes. He waited for full dark, then led the horse out of the lean-to, mounted and headed for a spot between Box-S and town, where he hoped to be able to see the ranchers in time to alarm Stubby.

After an hour's wait he begun to wonder if his guess had been wrong—if the ranchers were planning some other strategy. He was about to ride toward town and check up when he heard a horse snort. He quickly reached up and grabbed the mare's muzzle and waited. Presently a horse came into sight, the rider a blurred outline against the sky. Instead of passing, the rider pulled up and dismounted.

Thinking that it must be an advance guard for the ranchers, Neil rose quietly to his feet, unholstering his gun. There was no chance to sneak up on the man, so he gathered his muscles and leaped across the intervening space, ramming the gun hard in the man's back.

"Don't call out!" he said softly. "Just stand." He threw his left arm around the man's neck to keep him from yelling. Immediately, he realized that something was wrong. He loosened his grip.

"Marcia!"

She turned toward him, her face a pale oval in the darkness. "What're you doing here, Neil? Did you find out about—?" She broke off suddenly and looked past him into the gloom. "Is the rest of the Warbird crew with you?"

He grabbed her arm. "Wait, Marcia! At least give me a chance to explain. I'm not at Warbird any more. The deal with my father is off."

She jerked her arm loose. "You expect me to believe that, Neil, after what's happened?"

"Good Lord, Marcia, you've got to believe me! There isn't time to explain now. Your father and the others will be along any minute."

"So you *did* find out. And you're going to—"

"Listen, Marcia. I'm not here to hurt anybody. I'm just trying to prevent a gunfight. If your dad and the others raid Box-S, they'll have Warbird on their necks before you know it. What chance do you think they'll have then, against men like Flake Bridger and Ace Pollock?"

She was silent for a moment, and he reached out and took hold of her shoulders. "Trust me, Marcia! Don't you realize it's you I love—not Warbird, or Delight DuBois, or anyone else?"

Her shoulders trembled, and he heard her catch her breath. "I *want* to believe, Neil. I don't know—Dad told me not to listen to you." She broke off suddenly and turned her head. "They're coming, Neil! Even if you're telling the truth, it's too late now. I intended to set fire to that haystack in Stubby's yard, but there isn't time now. They'll ride in before he knows they're near and someone's sure to get hurt."

"You stay here!" Neil turned and vaulted into his saddle. "That's all I wanted to know. Maybe I can still make it."

"Oh Neil—be careful!"

"There's not time enough to be careful." Neil spurred his horse, heedless of the darkness. The animal snorted and took off at a faltering gallop through the brush, which whipped at Neil's face. Behind him he heard shouts as the ranchers realized that they weren't alone.

His horse levelled out as it reached the flat ground near the ranch. Neil spotted the haystack and pulled the animal to a sliding stop. He jumped from the saddle and snatched a match out of his pocket, crouched down beside the haystack and dragged the match across his boot. The tiny flame died down momentarily, then a wisp of hay caught fire. The fire spread rapidly, igniting the whole stack. Neil ran for his horse, but the animal had shied away from the fire. He heard the ranchers riding up and knew there would be no time to catch the horse, so he ran toward the ranch-house.

"Stubby. It's me—Neil. Don't shoot!"

The ranch house door opened and Stubby said angrily, "What's the idea, Neil? What's the idea firin' my hay?" Without waiting for an answer, he said sharply, "Hold your fire, men. It's Neil Wallace." Neil heard movement in the house and darted inside.

"The little ranchers plan to take over your place, Stubby. They're out there right now. I doubt if they'll come any farther, though, now that you can see 'em."

"Damn!" Stubby sounded worried. "I ain't got any fight with them fellers. What're they pickin' on me for?"

"It isn't you, Stubby. They figure to control the creek." Neil turned to look through the window. Behind the fire, several men on horseback were milling around uncertainly. "Let 'em leave peacefully if they will," he said. "They won't

come out in the light—not with Hub Talbert the main one that wanted to come here in the first place.”

The hay was burning fiercely, illuminating the whole area. As Neil had predicted, the ranchers pulled back out of the light. In a moment, their horses’ hoofbeats faded in the distance.

Stubby lighted a lamp. “Much obliged, Neil. I wasn’t expectin’ anything like this.” He turned to his two crew members. “Hogan, you’d better stand guard. Call me at midnight.”

Neil went to the door. “I’ve got to find that horse. He spooked when the fire blazed up. I’ll be seeing you.”

“Sure.” Stubby scratched his chin worriedly. “I reckon you’ll tell your pa about this. He’ll likely want to do something about it.”

Neil shook his head. “I’m not living at Warbird any more, Stubby. I’ll be going to the hotel tonight.” He closed the door quickly behind him, not wanting to answer any more questions.

His horse was grazing at the edge of the firelight and he caught up the reins and mounted, heading for the spot where he had left Marcia. She didn’t answer, though, when he called. Likely beat it back to the ranch, he decided, so she’d be there when her father returned.

Thinking about her on his ride to Kingvale, he shook his head gloomily. Why did a man have to be so blind? From now on there would never be anyone but Marcia so far as he was concerned. And yet he had no right to expect her to feel the same way about him.

He lifted his horse into a trot. Well, there was one thing he could do. He could try to prevent a senseless bloody war between Warbird and the ranchers. There must be some legal way to prevent King Wallace from going through with



his plans. An idea began to take shape in his mind, but he shook his head. He'd have to look to somebody for help—somebody with more knowledge of the law. He remembered seeing a lawyer's shingle next to the Mercantile. In the morning he'd look into it. Meanwhile, he'd be glad to get some food and find a bed—even one of the rock-hard beds in the Cattleman's Hotel.

## Chapter Twelve

AS NEIL made his dash to alert Box-S, Marcia remained where she was and saw the ranchers gallop past her toward the house, then pull up and start to mill around uncertainly as the haystack caught fire. Her breath failed for a moment when Neil had to make his run for the house, and she breathed a little prayer of thanks when he reached it without being met by gunfire.

She heard Hub Talbert's complaining voice, and her father's calm answer, and realized that the danger was over for the present, so she reined her horse around and started back toward Broken Bow, lifting her horse into a canter as soon as she felt that she was far enough away so that she couldn't be heard. Her presence on Box-S land would be hard to explain, particularly since she had come without her father's knowledge.

There was something else she had to do under cover of darkness—take food to Dutch Shortinghuis at his hideout in the hills. With this purpose in mind, she rode rapidly to the

ranch, picked up a bag of food which Mrs. Shortinghuis had prepared, and left the house at a run, the woman's admonition for caution still in her ears.

She remounted her horse and cut across the ranch yard toward a faint trail which led to the hideout. As she entered the fringe of trees that bordered the yard, she thought she heard the first sounds of the returning ranchers, but when she stopped to listen the sound was not repeated, so she headed the horse onto the vaguely discernible trail.

The path was one which she had been familiar since childhood, and it led to a cave where she and Neil had played as children. The place had occurred to her immediately when she had been faced with the problem of hiding the Dutchman after taking him out of the hayloft, and she had managed to get him there that night without being discovered, although it had been a hard trip for the wounded man.

Later, she had revealed the secret to Dutch's wife, whose calm mask could not conceal her worry about her husband. Of course Mrs. Shortinghuis had wanted to go to the cave where she could nurse the wounded man, but Marcia had refused to take her, knowing that King might very well have assigned one of his crew to keep an eye on the woman just in case this might happen.

The moon had just begun to come up when Marcia stopped to breathe her horse before heading up the last little hill which would bring her to the cave. She turned in the saddle and looked down into the valley below, glistening now in the first full light of the moon. Somewhere down there, a mere ten miles distant, men were making their devious plans, but up here on the hillside everything seemed peaceful.

A gentle breeze whispered through the pines, and some

nocturnal animal made a slight noise which sounded loud in the silence. Nature was beautiful, she mused, and men made it such a mockery. She turned wearily in the saddle and put her horse up the last stretch of trail, swinging out of the saddle as she reached the cave's mouth, and tying her horse to a scrub pine. She faced the cave and called out. Dutch's deep voice greeted her, so she entered the cave, pushing aside the blanket which she had previously hung there.

"By golly," Dutch said. "I'm glad you're here. I was beginning to get worried." He struck a match and lit a candle stuck in the neck of a bottle. His face was furrowed with concern. "The old woman and kids—they're all right?"

"They're fine. Your wife wanted to come along, but I told her it wasn't safe." She put down the bag of food and moved over beside him. "How about you? Has your side bothered you much?"

He shook his head and smiled grimly. "A Dutchman don't die easy, miss. Another day or two and I'll be able to travel." He rose on his elbows, opened his mouth, to say something, then made a wild grab for the shotgun that lay beside him on the floor of the cave.

"Don't try it, Dutch!"

Marcia whirled around and saw Flake Bridger standing in the entrance, his six gun in his hand. There was an oily smirk on his horribly battered face, and he let his eyes touch her with their baleful gleam.

"So you're the one," he said. "I sort of figured you'd be worth watchin'."

He came on into the cave, letting the blanket fall shut behind him. Without lowering the muzzle of his gun, he reached down and picked up the shotgun, which he took to the cave entrance and tossed out into the darkness. He

holstered his gun, then, and came back to face Marcia, who had risen to her feet and was watching him in despair. His lips curled into a wicked grin.

"By God! You're really gettin' to be a woman, ain't you?" He reached out and seized Marcia roughly by the shoulder. "Turn around here, so a man can get a look at you." His eyes made her feel naked.

Marcia jerked her shoulder free. "Keep your hands off me," she said, trying to conceal her fright. "Even the kind of men you run with would kill you if you went too far."

Bridger's grin vanished and he pushed his open palm into her face, thrusting her to the floor. "Don't try that high-and-mighty stuff with me, damn it. After tomorrow there won't be anybody to worry about what happens to you."

As Marcia tried to get to her feet, Dutch pulled himself to his knees, his broad face knotted with fury. "Damn you, Bridger! You ain't fit to live. I'll—"

Whirling away from Marcia, Bridger drew his gun and slashed it down on the Dutchman's head. Dutch slumped to the floor, his mouth sagging open. Bridger turned back to face Marcia. "You'd get some of the same, but I've got other things in mind."

Marcia stared at him in revulsion, her hands holding together her blouse, which had ripped open when Flake pushed her over.

"Don't be so damned modest," Bridger said coarsely. "I went to a lot of trouble following you up here." He grabbed her blouse in his left hand and ripped it from her body. She beat at his chest with her fists, and he laughed. "God! What a hellion!" Suddenly he grabbed her two wrists and spun her around, twisting an arm behind her back. "Get down there on the floor!"

When she hesitated, he kicked her feet out from under

her, throwing her on her face. He brought her wrists together behind her back and knotted his bandana around them, drawing it tight.

"I'll come back for you when I've got more time. Right now I ain't going to risk everything for a damned wench."

He went over to the entrance, jerked down the blanket and tore it into strips. With one of these he bound her ankles.

Marcia watched him fearfully, not moving lest she arouse him again. She saw him roll Dutch roughly onto his face and bind his ankles, then use the Dutchman's belt to fasten his wrists behind his back. Shortinghuis groaned as his wound was reopened, and Marcia clamped her lips in helpless rage.

Bridger got to his feet and looked down at her. "Don't try any tricks. I've got Ace Pollock waiting outside. He might not know how to treat a lady like I do." He grinned. "You'll be better off if you wait for me." He looked around the cave, and his eyes picked out the flickering candle. "Just in case you've got any idea of burning those ropes, I'll relieve your mind." He ground his boot on the candle, plunging the cave into darkness, and went out into the open.

Marcia lay without moving until she heard his horse's hoofbeats fade in the distance. Her momentary relief at his departure changed to hopelessness as she realized that his going meant only a delay. Nobody would be looking for her. Mrs. Shortinghuis had promised to keep the hiding place secret, and before she got to the point of breaking her word, Bridger could be back. If anything were to be done, she'd have to do it herself. She twisted around on her back and sat up, straining at her bonds.

Dutch suddenly let out a grunt and began to mutter in a language which Marcia couldn't understand. Presently

his muttering stopped and he said worriedly, "Miss Marcia. Are you here?"

"I'm here. I'm tied, the same as you are." She began to inch across the floor. "I'll try to get close enough so you can reach the ropes. Maybe you could get them loose."

"Sure," he said, then added, "Where's Bridger?"

"He's gone, but he'll be back." She bumped along over the rough ground. "He said he was leaving Ace Pollock on guard, but I think he was lying. It sounded to me as if there might be two horses going back down the trail. Besides, if Ace were around, he'd be in here by now." She bumped the Dutchman in the dark, and he groaned.

"I'm sorry." She turned so that her feet were toward him. "Maybe if you lie on your side you'll be able to reach the ropes."

He dropped heavily to his side, and she felt his fingers groping at her feet. She moved a little, and he grunted with satisfaction. His fingers worked at her bonds for a long time, and she could hear him puffing with the effort. Finally he let out an exasperated snort. "I'll have to bust 'em. Them knots are too tight."

Marcia felt the blanket strips tighten around her ankles, then there was a ripping sound and she was free. "Now my wrists," she said, and got to her knees, turning her back to Dutch and moving around until he could reach the bandana. After a few minutes the bandana loosened and dropped to the floor.

Marcia rubbed her wrists to restore circulation, then began to work on Dutch's bonds.

"Use my knife," Dutch said. "It's in my pocket."

With the help of the knife, she soon had him free. She got to her feet and felt her way to the mouth of the cave, straining her ears. For several minutes she listened tensely,

but all she heard was the wind. Even then she was not satisfied, remembering how she had misinterpreted the noise made by Bridger before. Still, she couldn't hope to be positive, and there was no time to lose. She told Dutch what she was going to do, then went down the trail to where she had left her horse. The animal was gone. It came to her then that it was her own horse she had heard, mistakenly assuming that it was Pollock's. It left her on foot ten miles from the nearest ranch, from the closest help. She went back to the cave shaking her head grimly.

"Call out or I'll shoot!" Dutch challenged.

Marcia jumped. "It's me," she said. "You scared me. For a minute I forgot you didn't have a gun." She crossed the cave and told him about the horse. "It looks like I'll have to go back on foot, but before I do, we're going to have to move you to someplace where Bridger can't find you if he comes back."

"Forget about me," Dutch said sharply. "You're the one that's in danger."

"No." She reached for his arm. "We're in this together. Can you get on your feet?"

"I'll try." He rolled over on his face and pushed himself to his knees, Marcia helping as much as she could. Between them, they got him to his feet. He took a deep breath. "Supposing I can walk," he said. "Where will I go?"

The same question had been bothering her, but she knew he couldn't stay here. "We'll find something. There must be a deadfall near here. Something you can hide behind. I just wish—"

"I know. You wish someone was here with a gun. Someone like young Wallace." Dutch's voice was softer than usual. "Ain't that what you was thinkin'?"

"Yes," she said promptly, admitting it to herself for the first time.

"You know something?" Dutch said. "So do I, and I ain't even in love with the feller."

"Don't talk silly," Marcia said, glad that he couldn't see her face in the darkness. She drew his arm around her shoulders. "Right now, the important thing is to get you out of here."

"Let's go then," Dutch said, and began creeping along toward the mouth of the cave. Marcia could feel the tightness of his muscles, but he made no complaint. She remembered the shotgun then, but decided that getting away was more important. She could look for the shotgun later, if there was time. Already the sky was beginning to lighten.

### Chapter Thirteen

NEIL AWAKENED at dawn, a sour taste in his mouth from the greasy food he had eaten in the hotel kitchen the night before. He got stiffly out of bed and stood for a moment looking out the window at the vague shapes of the few buildings which were visible, noting that one of them was Kansas Hooper's livery stable, where he had left the Warbird horse the night before. This reminded him that he'd have to get hold of another mount if he hoped to accomplish anything before leaving Kingvale.

Smoke was drifting from a couple of chimneys, and the smell of cooking came from somewhere in the hotel, arousing



his appetite in spite of the taste in his mouth. He crossed over to the washstand, poured water into the tin basin, and shaved slowly and methodically, carefully avoiding the cuts and scabs still left from his fight with Bridger. There was an urgency to his thinking, but he held himself in check, knowing that he couldn't get anywhere with his plan until the lawyer arrived at his office, which probably wouldn't be earlier than eight o'clock.

When he had shaved, he finished dressing, bundled up his belongings in the warbag, and went downstairs. The night clerk was asleep behind the counter, so he quietly set his bag in the corner and went out onto the wooden sidewalk, closing the door softly behind him.

A big wagon pulled by a team of draft horses was coming down the street from the east, the driver sitting round-shouldered on the seat, a woman beside him with a shawl over her head. They watched him curiously until they were alongside, then the man raised one hand in silent greeting. Neil lifted his own hand but didn't smile. Settlers, he thought, with no idea of the grief they were riding into. He shook his head and cut across the street toward the café, breathing deeply of the cool morning air.

Only one man was seated at the restaurant counter, Cal Mulholland, the marshal. He looked at Neil thoughtfully, then motioned toward the adjacent stool. Neil accepted the invitation, relieved that if there had to be only one man in the place it happened to be one of the few who would still speak to him.

"You rode in early," Mulholland said. "Something up?"

Neil turned to look at him, noticing the drawn look on the marshal's face, the troubled expression in his eyes, and feeling a sudden sympathy for this man who been caught by a situation he couldn't handle. Then the Chinaman came

out for Neil's order, and for a few minutes there was no chance to answer the marshal's question. When the cook had gone back to the kitchen, Neil said, "I spent the night in town, marshal. I've pulled out of Warbird."

"Pulled out?" The marshal seemed surprised, then a faint smile touched the corners of his mouth. "Yes. I reckon you would. I've run across you quiet fellers before." His grin faded. "Well, more power to you, boy. I admire a man with guts enough to stick up for what he believes in."

There was a touch of regret in Mulholland's voice, and Neil asked suddenly, "How about *you*, marshal? Would *you* stick up for your beliefs if you didn't think it were too late?"

"Me?" The marshal frowned at his coffee cup. "Hell, man, that's different. I've slipped too far to go back." He turned to look at Neil soberly. "There was a time, once—" He shrugged and let the sentence die.

They were silent for several minutes, Neil satisfied that the marshal didn't want to be questioned further. The cook brought a plate of ham and eggs and set it on the counter, and poured a cup of black coffee. Neil went to work on the food, paying little attention to his companion, although Mulholland's unfinished statement was still in his thoughts.

It was easy to see how the marshal could have drifted gradually into his present predicament. King was a persuasive talker and had a way of swaying people to his will. It was too bad, though, for more reasons than one. What Neil wanted to do must be done legally. Otherwise it was useless. If only the marshal could get over his feeling of hopelessness, he might be able to help.

They finished eating at about the same time, and Neil turned to face the other man. "I've got a crazy idea for busting up this deal of King's," he said. He had already quit

thinking of King as being his father. "It's something I can't do alone, and I ought to have the law on my side."

Mulholland looked at him narrowly, a faint hope showing in his eyes. Then the hope died. "It's no use, Neil. It's no use."

"Don't be too sure about that." Neil dropped a coin on the counter and got up from the stool. "You might think about it a little, and I'll drop by your office after I see that lawyer across the street."

"Sure," the marshal said, getting heavily to his feet. "Well, Heffern ought to be in his office by now. He's young, and hungry for business." He stopped to light a cigar, and Neil went out onto the street, angling toward the lawyer's office.

The marshal had guessed correctly, for Heffern, a thin-faced man with intelligent eyes, was seated behind his desk. He looked up when Neil entered. "Yes sir," he said. "Can I do something for you?"

"I'm Neil Wallace." Neil waited to see what effect this would have.

The lawyer grinned. "All right, so you're Neil Wallace. I'm Simon Heffern." He gestured toward a chair. "I'm not prejudiced against the name of Wallace if that's what you're wondering. Have a seat."

"Thanks." Neil found himself attracted to the man. "I want to talk to you about this fight over the water. I imagine you've heard about it."

"I couldn't very well help hearing, Wallace, unless I was deaf. Your father plans on diverting San Juan Creek into the old channel, thus leaving the little ranchers without any water for their stock. I've never been involved in any of this, but the man I bought out handled the deal when Stubblefield took over Box-S. He leaned across the desk. "By the way, are you here as a client, or just to pay a friendly visit?"

Neil smiled. "All right. I'm a client. I'm willing to pay for some legal advice."

"Good." Heffern grinned. "Now that we know where we stand, just exactly what is it that's on your mind?"

"Just this." Neil moved his chair closer to the desk. "According to King Wallace, he has the right to use as much water as he wants from San Juan Creek. Does that sound reasonable?"

The lawyer nodded. "Since Wallace deeded the land to Stubblefield in the first place, it's logical to believe he'd have protected himself. As far as that goes, he'd have riparian rights anyway, so long as the creek is adjacent to Warbird property."

"All right, then, tell me this. Would King have the right to enter Box-S property with his crew to build a dam and dig a ditch that would change the course of the stream?"

The lawyer smiled. "Legally—no. From a practical standpoint—yes." He tilted back in his chair. "Inasmuch as Wallace holds Stubblefield's notes for far more than the ranch is worth, I'm afraid Stubblefield hasn't much choice. He can either follow Wallace's orders or forfeit Box-S." He let his chair legs bang to the floor. "Understand, I'm not revealing any professional secret here. I had nothing to do with the notes personally, but the information came into my possession in a roundabout way."

"Fair enough." Neil met the lawyer's eyes soberly, aware that a great deal depended on the answer to the next question. "Suppose Stubblefield could be persuaded to take the risk, is there any way he could make King move off Box-S property—even temporarily?"

The lawyer chuckled. "All he'd need would be an eviction order and maybe a troop of U.S. cavalry to back it up." He frowned. "At any rate, what earthly good would it do? Wal-

lace could demand payment of the notes and Stubblefield would have to give up."

Neil's hopes rose. "That would take time, wouldn't it?"

"Not enough to matter. Wallace could serve a foreclosure notice on him. He'd have maybe a day or two to either pay up or get out."

Neil grinned. "You're not allowing for King's impatience. He's already said he was going to switch the stream today. He's a man that never changes his mind."

"Maybe so." The lawyer shrugged. "I admire your courage, Neil, but you still haven't arranged for that troop of cavalry. You don't plan on running Warbird off there by yourself?"

"I might persuade Cal Mulholland to give me a hand. I want this to be strictly according to the law."

"Mulholland?" The lawyer's eyebrows shot up. "You're not gambling on him, are you?"

"A man has to gamble on something." Neil got up and turned toward the door, stopping in the doorway. Suppose King *did* do the reasonable thing? Suppose he curbed his impatience and went about it legally? He crossed back to the desk.

"You're the only lawyer in town. I reckon if King decided to have Stubby thrown off the ranch, he'd come to you for the necessary papers."

The lawyer nodded. "Unless he wanted to go to the county seat."

Neil grinned. "You know," he said, "I've already got another job for you. It strikes me I'd like to know how many bricks there are in the courthouse. Could you go over to the county seat for me and make the investigation?"

"Now?"

Neil nodded. "Just as soon as you make out that order

against Warbird." He grinned. "It's funny how bad I want to know about those bricks."

The lawyer shrugged, and reached in his desk drawer for a piece of paper. He dipped his pen in the inkwell and began to write. "I'll make this against King Wallace and several John Does. That ought to cover everybody." He went on writing, studied the paper, and handed it to Neil. "Of course, you understand this has to be signed by Stubblefield."

"I understand." Neil pretended a confidence he didn't feel. "All right, I'll pay you and you can be on your way." He reached in his pocket. "You'll have to rent a rig at the livery."

"Skip it." Heffern pushed back his chair. "If you've got nerve enough to buck King Wallace, I guess I'll just wait for my money." He grinned. "As you said, a man has to gamble sometimes. Who knows, if you come out of this alive, I might have a new client."

"Or lose an old one," Neil said. He waited for Heffern to get his hat, and followed him down the stairs, watching until he had reached the livery stable and gone inside.

Kingvale was beginning to come to life, and Neil had to wait for several mounted men to ride past before he cut across to the marshal's office. When he did, he found Mulholland seated behind his desk, cleaning a six gun. The marshal looked up at Neil absently, finished the cleaning job, and stuffed cartridges into the chambers. Only then did he speak.

"Any luck with the lawyer?"

Neil tapped his pocket. "I've got an order for Warbird to get off of Stubby's land. Now all I've got to do is to get Stubby to sign it—and get a badge-toter to serve it on King Wallace or whoever's at the dam."

Mulholland looked around the shabby office, his eyes bleak. Finally he got to his feet and walked over to stare at a faded poster bearing the word *Wanted*. He looked at it a long time, then turned to face Neil. "If you're figuring on me to tackle King Wallace, you might as well forget it. I thought I'd made that clear by now." He moved behind the desk and sat down, his eyes focused on the floor.

Neil stared at the marshal helplessly. How did you help a man to find his nerve again, once he'd lost it? He remembered then how Mulholland had disarmed Dutch Shortinghuis, and said mildly, "How'd you happen to get this job, marshal?"

Mulholland looked up blankly. "What's the difference? That was a long time ago."

"Sure it was, but tell me about it. I'm curious."

The marshal shrugged. "It was ten years back, Wallace. I was a deputy over at the county seat then and I had some luck bringing in three fellers that had stuck up the bank. Your pa heard about it and sent for me. He offered me this job and I took it. I didn't know then—" He let his voice trail off hopelessly.

"But you *did* bring in those three bank robbers. I reckon they put up a fight, didn't they?"

The marshal's eyes brightened. "You're damned right they did! I'm still carrying one of their slugs in my leg." His eyes narrowed. "What's the idea of bringing that up now?"

Neil grinned. "Nothing. I just wondered how a man like you could lose his guts so quick." He shook his head. "All right, marshal—forget it. Just deputize me and I'll handle it myself. Somebody's got to do your job for you."

Mulholland stood up and kicked back his chair. "Damn you, Wallace, let me alone!"

"Sure, marshal. Just pin a star on my chest and you can go hide in the corner."

"Shut up!" Mulholland reached across the desk and grabbed the front of Neil's shirt. "You get Stubby to sign that paper, and I'll serve it myself. Then maybe I can look at myself in a mirror again without puking." He grabbed his hat off a nail. "Come on, let's ride."

## Chapter Fourteen

HUB TALBERT stood well back from the window of Diamond's saloon and watched Neil cross over to the restaurant and go in. He began to curse, and Frank Diamond looked up at him from behind the bar, not attempting to conceal his contempt for the little rancher. If Talbert noticed the look, he gave no indication.

"Damn it," he said. "Young Wallace just went across the street. I sure as hell hope he don't take a notion to come over here."

"The saloon ain't even supposed to be open this time of day," Diamond said flatly. "Besides, didn't you tell the others to come in through the alley?"

Talbert nodded.

"Then what're you squawkin' about?" Diamond came from behind the bar and sat down at one of the poker tables. "As far as that goes, I've got my doubts if the others will show up anyway."

"They'll be here," Talbert said crossly. "By God, they



better be. We ain't got time to fool around if we're going to stop Wallace. He says he's going to close the dam again today." He walked over to the bar, taking nervous little steps. "I could use a drink, Frank."

The saloonman didn't get up. "I reckon you could at that. You'll likely be leadin' the party when they meet the Warbird crew." His tone was sarcastic, but Talbert didn't seem to notice. "Anyway, the bar ain't open for business—not at half past seven in the morning." He glanced at the wall clock. "I didn't get out of here until three. I don't know why the hell I agreed to let you fellers meet here in the first place."

Talbert turned away from the bar, looking worried. "Don't go back on us now, Frank." His voice was a whine. "We've been good customers of yours—don't forget that."

Diamond gave him a hard stare and the little man turned away, biting his lower lip. He stiffened at a noise at the back of the building and looked at Diamond anxiously.

"Well, ain't you going to let 'em in, Hub?"

"Sure. Sure I am, Frank." Talbert crossed to the back door, turned the latch, and peered through the crack a moment, then stepped nimbly aside as somebody shoved the door violently.

"What's got into you, Hub?" Will Turner strode into the room, turning to look at Talbert. "Has somebody been telling you ghost stories or something?" Without waiting for an answer, he directed his glance toward the saloonman. "Morning, Frank. I never expected to see you around at this time of day."

"Hello, Will." Diamond grinned bleakly. "Now I'm here, I'm beginning to doubt if it was worth getting up for." He ducked his head toward Talbert. "It's likely just another of Hub's half-cocked ideas."

Talbert looked aggrieved. "You shouldn't've said that, Frank. Somebody had to call the meeting, and I've got as much right as anybody else." When Diamond didn't dispute this, he seemed to gain courage and went on more boldly. "Seems to me you ought to thank me instead of actin' the way you are. It was your mirror he broke."

Diamond frowned at him a moment, then turned toward Turner. "How about it, Will? Is this thing as bad as Hub makes out?"

"I'm afraid it is." Will Turner shook his head grimly. "I used to think I knew King Wallace, him and me havin' got our start together, but I'm beginning to think I never knew him at all. I'm afraid King won't stop until he owns all the land in the valley, and he won't worry too much about how he gets it."

"See?" Talbert pointed a grimy finger at Diamond. "Now maybe you'll believe me."

"Shut up, Hub." Diamond kept his eyes on Will Turner. "If you say so, Will, I guess it's right." He frowned. "I ain't forgettin' a lot of things he's done—things besides breaking my mirror." He turned his head quickly. "Somebody's comin' up the alley now. Must be another of your crowd."

"I reckon so." Turner crossed to the door and opened it. "Howdy, Davenport. I'm glad you could come."

The Englishman stepped into the room, smiling. "I hadn't much choice, actually. We're all in this together." He shook hands with Turner and nodded politely at the others. "By the way, I understand Neil Wallace spent the night at the hotel. Kansas Hooper told me when I stopped there with my horse."

"He did?" Turner turned to frown at Talbert. "Did you know that, Hub?"

The little man nodded. "He's over at the café right now."

He looked suspiciously at Davenport. "That reminds me, didn't I see Neil over at your place yesterday? What was he after?"

Davenport looked at him coldly. "He was there, Talbert. As to whether you saw him, I wouldn't be surprised if you did. You see almost everything that goes on around here. I'm always amazed that you can operate a ranch and still find time to take care of so many other interests."

Frank Diamond laughed. "By God, Davenport, I've been waiting to hear somebody say that to his face, but I never expected it to be you." He frowned thoughtfully. "Maybe there's something to this velvet glove stuff at that."

Talbert flushed. "I still say it ain't right for one of the Wallaces to be gettin' too thick with any of us fellers. It looks like—"

"Are you accusing me of disloyalty, Talbert?"

"Hold on, you two." Will Turner stepped between them. "Everybody's a little worked up lately, but we can't afford to let it run away with us. Our only chance is in stickin' together." He looked at Davenport soberly. "Right?"

The Englishman nodded. "You're right, Will. Maybe I'm a little touchy this morning." He turned toward Talbert. "Forget it, Hub. I spoke too fast."

"Well—" The little man turned away quickly, seemingly relieved that there was a knock on the back door at that moment. This time he opened the door all the way, and several men came into the room together. They glanced quickly around the room, then let their hands fall away from their holsters, most of them looking a little self-conscious to be wearing guns so conspicuously.

One of the men crossed over and held out his hand to Turner. "Mornin', Will," he said. "We happened to meet up

the road a piece so we came in together." He indicated three other men who had followed him into the room.

"Glad to see you, Jake," Turner said. He thought a moment. "Soon as Travis and O'Connor get here, we'll be all set." He shook his head glumly. "With Dutch missing, and his man dead, we're pretty short-handed to buck up against Warbird. I still think there ought to be a peaceful way of handling this."

Hub Talbert spoke up quickly. "There ain't any peaceful way of fightin' with King Wallace. You know that as well as me, Will. Look what happened to Dutch and the way King sent a man out to kill Dutch's rider."

Davenport stepped away from the bar, frowning at the little man. "That's something I haven't been able to understand. Dutch never impressed me as being the kind of man who would blow up that dam."

Talbert darted a quick glance at the others. "Well, he did it. I guess you believe it now." He tried to outstare the Englishman, but had to turn away.

"Somebody else *could* have done it," Davenport said thoughtfully. "Somebody who was too cowardly to take the blame himself. I'd like to hear Dutch's own explanation of the affair."

Talbert whirled to face Turner. "See, Will? He ain't on our side at all. I told you he had no business bein' so friendly with young Wallace."

Several of the other men looked at the Englishman doubtfully.

"If you gentlemen would feel more comfortable without me," Davenport said, "I'll be glad to withdraw."

Turner grabbed his arm. "You're in the same fix we are, Davenport. Don't pay any attention to Hub." He turned

toward the back of the room. "Here come the others. Now we can get started."

Two more men came into the room, nodding at those who were already there. Will Turner latched the door and crossed to look out the front window for a moment. Across the street, Neil Wallace came out of the restaurant and went to Heffern's law office. Turner watched until he was out of sight, then beckoned to one of the new arrivals.

"Stay here by the window, Travis, just in case anybody gets nosy." He crossed to the bar and put his back against it.

"All right, men. You know why we're here. Hub Talbert thinks we ought to ride against Warbird right away. Personally, I'm in favor of trying to reason with Wallace once more, but I don't pretend to speak for the entire group. That's why we're having this meeting—so we can decide on which course to follow. As far as I'm concerned, I'll go along with whatever the majority decides."

Talbert edged out of the group and turned to face them. "Turner means well," he said, "but Turner's gettin' old. Besides, him and King Wallace was old-time friends." He turned a shifty glance at Will. "I ain't fixin' to set still and let Warbird move in on us just for fear of hurtin' somebody's feelings. I say we ought to shoot the bastards down!"

"Suppose they shoot us down?" Davenport asked mildly. "Are you in favor of *that*?"

The little man looked at him sharply, then turned away. "We got to take a gamble, men. If we act fast enough, and King don't suspect anything, we've got a good chance. I say we give it a try."

Will Turner was looking at him speculatively. "That doesn't sound like you, Hub. I never took you for the kind of man

who'd ride out against a bunch of gunmen like Warbird's crew."

"Then you'd better change your ideas," Talbert said hotly. He looked at the others. "How about you, Jake? Are you going to take this lyin' down?"

The man called Jake rubbed a work-hardened hand across his whiskers and looked around at the others uncertainly. "Hell," he said, "I ain't scared of gettin' killed if I know it's worth the risk. It's just—well, I've got the wife and the kids to think of. I don't know."

The man at the window turned. "Young Wallace and the lawyer just came down the stairs, Will. I don't know where Heffern went, but Wallace is headed for the marshal's place."

Frank Diamond had drawn apart from the others. Now he glanced around at their faces, then looked at the shattered mirror behind the bar. He muttered something under his breath and stood up. "A man always thinks clearer after a little drink," he said carelessly. "Maybe that's what this party needs."

Will Turner frowned, but the others crowded up to the bar, accepting the whiskey eagerly. Hub Talbert gulped his so fast that some of the liquor trickled down his chin.

"They're comin' out of the marshal's office," the man at the window said. "Him and Mulholland both. They're goin' around back. Likely they're goin' after some horses."

Will Turner was trying to catch the saloonkeeper's eyes, but Diamond didn't look up. He refilled the glasses, an odd look on his face. \*

"All right, men, that ought to hold us for a while." Will Turner motioned for Diamond to take away the bottle, and Talbert gave him a mean look. "We've got serious business

to tend to." He smiled. "If it works out right, I'll set 'em up myself."

Travis spoke up from the window. "They've got their horses and they're headin' out of town." He hesitated. "Hey! Don't I get any of that free liquor?"

Turner thought a moment. "You're entitled to the same as the rest of us, Travis." He stepped behind the bar and filled a glass, which he took to the man at the window. He came back to face the others.

"How about the rest of you men? How do you feel about this?" He singled out Davenport with a glance. "What do *you* think we ought to do?"

The Englishman smiled and shook his head. "I'll keep out of it, Will. Somebody might misunderstand my intentions."

"Yeah. Leave him out," Talbert said bluntly. It was apparent that the whiskey had boosted his courage. He walked over to face Jake.

"What's going to happen to your missus and the kids if King takes over your ranch? I guess you ain't forgotten the work you've put in on that place. Do you aim to let it slip through your fingers just because you ain't got guts enough to face up to King Wallace?"

Jake scowled. The whiskey had begun to affect him, too. "Who says I ain't got guts?" he demanded. "I say we ride."

"Now you're talkin' like a man," Halbert said with satisfaction. He looked around at the others. "I say we take a vote—right now."

Will Turner sighed gustily. "All right, Hub. That's your privilege. Everybody in favor of riding against Warbird now, step out."

Talbert and Jake moved away from the group and turned to face the other men, who looked at each other uncertainly.

Suddenly the man called O'Connor walked over to the bar.

"An Irishman ain't scared of nobody," he said thickly. "Come on, you rannys."

Two other men moved away, leaving only Davenport, who looked at Will and lifted his shoulders. Travis left the window to join the larger group.

"That settles it," Turner said. "We ride." He turned to look down at Talbert. "I guess you'll want to lead this party, Hub, since it was your idea."

The little man shook his head. "You're the leader, Will. I don't want to change anything."

"Thanks." Turner smiled ironically. "All right, men, if we're going to ride, we've got to do it before King finds out what what we're up to. If he was expectin' us, he could wipe us out without half tryin'. It won't do for us to leave town together, so we'll go out the back door one or two at a time and meet an hour from now out by my place." He squared his shoulders. "Agreed?"

Nobody answered, so he said, "Travis, you and O'Connor go out first." He glanced up at the clock. "It's ten after eight. We'll meet a little after nine."

Travis and O'Connor passed out into the alley, and Davenport came up to where Will Turner was standing. "Too bad, Will," he said. "We aren't going to have a chance." He looked around at Hub Talbert, who was grinning with satisfaction. "I'm still puzzled about that business with Dutch. I wonder—" He turned away from the bar and crossed over to face Talbert, smiling as he did.

"You win, Hub. I just want you to know there's no hard feelings." He held out his hand.

The little man looked at him suspiciously, then took the



Englishman's hand. "No hard feelings," he said. "We all make mistakes."

"Certainly." The Englishman reached in his pocket for a wallet. "By the way, it isn't fair for you to stand all the expense. I figure my share comes to about ten dollars." He held out a gold piece.

Talbert started to reach for it, then looked up quickly. "What're you drivin' at, Davenport?"

The Englishman's smile was friendly. "Take it, Hub. You must've paid a good deal to that fellow who blew up the dam. You're the only one of us smart enough to think of something like that."

Talbert stiffened, and backed up as though he had been hit. His tongue slid along the thin line of his lips and he put a hand on his pistol.

"Hold it, Hub." Will Turner's voice was sharp. He crossed to the little man and grabbed the front of his shirt. "Don't lie to me, Hub. Did you pay somebody to blow up the dam?"

Talbert tried to squirm loose, but Turner's grip was too much for him. He drew back his lips, exposing yellow teeth. "You're damn right I did. Somebody had to do something. The rest of you fellers was willin' to set back and wait." He glared up at Turner, who let loose of his shirt and raised his fist, then let it fall at his side.

"I suppose it never struck you you could do the job yourself instead of making it look like some of the Dutchman's doing. A rat like you wouldn't think of it that way." He pointed to the back door. "Get out of here, Talbert, before I do something I'll regret."

Talbert scurried across the room and darted out into the alley. Will Turner's shoulders slumped. "Damn such a yellow coward," he said. "I've never trusted the man, but I

didn't suspect—" He turned toward the Englishman and shook his head defeatedly.

Davenport's eyes were sympathetic. "You can't think of everything, Will." He frowned. "What effect does this have on our plans?"

"None." Turner straightened his shoulders. "The men voted to go through with it, and I can't see that this thing makes any difference as far as the rest of it goes. We'll meet at my place as planned." He turned to watch two more men go into the alley.

Frank Diamond looked up at him guiltily. "I reckon it's partly my fault, Will. I never should've served that whiskey. I guess I got to thinkin' about that mirror."

Turner stood watching him a few minutes before he spoke. When he did speak, his voice was mild. "Don't let it worry you, Frank. I reckon it had to come sooner or later. Likely it's my fault more than yours. I should've stopped King Wallace before he lost his head."

He crossed the room and went out into the alley, his hand resting on the butt of his six gun.

## Chapter Fifteen

AS NEIL AND the marshal rode out of Kingvale, it seemed that a strange hush lay across the valley—as though even nature were waiting for violence to erupt. Neil tried to rid himself of the feeling, but it persisted, and they had ridden half a mile before he realized that it was more than a pre-

monition. When it came to him, he reined off the road toward the misty outline of the creek. Presently Mulholland joined him and swore softly.

"So it's already happened," he said.

Neil nodded grimly, his eyes focused on the dwindling trickle of water that moved sluggishly along the rocky creek bottom. It came to him then that in talking to the lawyer he had underestimated his father's impatience. King hadn't even bothered with the formality of legal action. Sending Heffern out of town had been a waste of time.

He turned to see the marshal watching him thoughtfully. He shook his head and reined his mount back to the road, where he paused to take stock. With the dam already closed and the ditch presumably opened, King would be expecting some retaliatory action. It would make Neil's plan harder to follow. Still, there was nothing to do but go through with it.

Mulholland pulled up beside him. "Must've just happened," he said. "Likely we're the first ones to know about it." He hesitated. "What do we do now, son?"

Neil turned to grin at him, although he had no reason for grinning. "We get Stubby to sign this paper. Then all we have to do is run the Warbird men off Box-S land."

"All?" the marshal said dryly. "You make it sound easy, mister." He shrugged. "Okay. I'll come along for the ride."

"Thanks." Neil giggled his horse into motion and headed on toward Stubby's.

An hour later they rode into the yard at Box-S. Stubby came out to meet them, leaning a rifle against the front of the house. "King went ahead and did it," he said needlessly. "I figured you might be some of the ranchers." He motioned toward the house. "Crawl off your saddles and come in. Coffee's hot."

"We can use it." Neil and the marshal swung down and followed Stubblefield into the kitchen, accepting the mugs of scalding black coffee which he offered them.

Stubby squinted at Neil speculatively. "You men ain't said yet what you're here for. Is it something to do with the dam?"

Neil nodded, wondering how to go about this without alienating Stubby entirely. Stubby was an unimaginative man, and could easily turn stubborn if approached the wrong way. "It's the dam, all right, Stubby." Neil put down his cup. "Maybe you remember I told you about not being at Warbird any more."

"I've been wondering about that. Did you and King have an argument?"

"Well, not exactly an argument. Just something that opened my eyes to the kind of man King has become." Neil sensed the sudden withdrawal in Stubby's attitude, and went on quickly. "You've got some good friends among the little ranchers, haven't you, Stubby? Men you've known for a long time?"

"Sure I have." Stubby's brow was knotted in an obvious effort to decide what this was leading to. "But I ain't forgetting that King Wallace is my friend, too. If you're trying to make me—"

Neil shook his head. "Nobody's trying to make you do anything, Stubby. This is your ranch and you'll do as you please." He reached for his tobacco, his fingers shaking a little with his anxiety to get this thing settled and bring things to a head before the ranchers found out about the dam and got organized for a fight. He struck a match and looked at Stubby over the tip of his cigarette. "How did you happen to get Box-S, Stubby? When I left, you were punching cows for Warbird."

Stubby frowned. "That was King Wallace's doing, Neil. Your pa called me in his office one day and asked me if I'd like to run a spread of my own." He grinned. "Hell. I didn't have enough cash to buy a new hat, let alone go to ranching. But King said there was this little piece of Warbird he didn't need and he'd be willing to stake me until I got going, so I jumped at it."

"And now it's all yours?"

Stubby rubbed his chin. "Well, not exactly. Your pa never did get his money back. In fact I had to borrow some more a few years back."

"Then King really owns the place—if he wants to take it away from you?"

"Damn it, Neil, what're you driving at?"

"Didn't it ever strike you as being funny for King Wallace to set you up in business?"

Stubby nodded. "Sure, it did. But if you're trying to make out that there was something crooked about the deal—"

"Not crooked, Stubby. Not as far as you're concerned." Neil stood up and leaned across the table. "But look what it's caused. Your friends, Will Turner and the others, they must've realized that someone could turn the creek back into its old channel, but with you owning Box-S, they thought they were safe. They trusted you, and look where it's got 'em. If you let King go through with it, they'll all be out of business."

Blood rushed into Stubby's face and his mouth became bitter. "Damn you, Neil, you've got no right to talk like that. I've never done anything to hurt Will Turner or any of 'em." His eyes narrowed. "It's easy for you to tell me what to do. I'm the one that'll lose this ranch if I try to cross King Wallace."

"That's right." Neil held Stubby's angry eyes with his own.

"But suppose you *don't* buck Warbird—have you thought about what you'll lose then? About how you'll feel when your friends lose their ranches—when their cattle begin to die for lack of water?" He reached out and grabbed Stubby's shoulder. "Think about it, man! Then ask yourself if you're going to sit back and let King Wallace go through with it."

Stubby stared at him bleakly a moment, then turned a troubled glance at the marshal. "I don't know—" He moistened his lips. "What do *you* say about this, Cal?"

The marshal grinned wryly. "He gets under your hide, don't he, Stubby?" His grin faded. "All I know is I'm here—after taking Warbird's orders for five years—and I'm beginning to feel pretty good again." He looked at Neil and frowned. "When it comes to that, I reckon Neil stands to lose more than any of us. He likely let Warbird slip through his fingers when he decided his pa was doing the wrong thing. Maybe *that* wasn't an easy choice either."

Stubby sucked in a deep breath and shook his head grimly. "All right, Neil. Right now I hate your guts, but maybe you're right. What do you want me to do?"

Neil took the paper out of his pocket. "Just sign this. You'll be glad someday that you did." He laid the paper on the table and put a pencil beside it.

Stubby picked up the pencil and scrawled his name on the paper. He looked up and grinned wryly. "It's been nice knowin' you fellers."

The marshal cleared his throat. "Don't bury us too quick, Stubby. We ain't dead yet."

"No?" Stubby got to his feet. "That's a matter of opinion."

Neil snatched up the paper. "Thanks, Stubby. You won't regret this." He handed the paper to the marshal. "Just one thing more while we're here. Is there any more dynamite on the place?"

Stubby nodded. "You plannin' on usin' it?"

"I might." Neil waited for the marshal to join him in the doorway. "If I need it, I'll holler." He stepped out into the yard, mounted his borrowed horse and headed for the dam, Mulholland jogging along beside him.

Presently the dam was in sight, and Neil motioned to stop. "Remember, marshal, we aren't looking for a fight if we can avoid it. Just let me do the talking."

"It's your party," the marshal said. "I'll be hangin' around in case you need me."

Neil put his mount into motion and rode toward the dam at a lope. Ahead of him he saw that two mounted men were watching them. He recognized one of them as Ace Pollock, and his lips thinned. With Ace to deal with, there was slight chance of settling things peacefully. He reached down and loosened the gun in his holster.

The marshal chuckled. "What was that about not wanting a fight?"

Neil grinned at him without answering. Then they were at the dam, which was now completely closed.

Ace Pollock stared at them suspiciously, his hand hanging close to his gun. "What're you gents looking for?" he asked. "Trouble?"

Neil held his voice down. "You know me, Ace. I never look for trouble. Not if I can miss it." He held the man's gaze with his own. "You're going to have to get off Box-S land, Ace—you and your friend here." He nodded toward the marshal, without taking his eyes off the gunman. "It's all according to law. The marshal has the papers if you'd like to see 'em."

Ace began to grin. "You're tellin' *me* to get off? Now you ought to know better than that, sonny. There's just one way to make me leave, and you ain't the man to do it."

Neil drew in his breath slowly, realizing the hopelessness of arguing with this man. But time was pressing. "You don't leave me much choice, Ace. We'll have to see if you're right. Get movin'!"

Ace's hand streaked to his gun as Neil clawed for his own weapon. Both weapons came up, but Neil's was a little faster. He saw his bullet slap into Ace's chest. Even then, the gunman tried to trigger another shot, and Neil had to put a second bullet into him. Then Ace rolled out of the saddle, his gun flying out of his fingers.

Neil whirled to see the other Warbird rider staring at the marshal, who now had his gun palmed. "Thanks, Mulholland," he said. "Thanks for hanging around."

The marshal shrugged. "You're handy with that gun, mister, but I didn't figure you could handle 'em both."

"Just lucky," Neil said. "Ace didn't give me credit for being much good. Likely he got careless." He turned toward the other puncher. "You willing to let it ride?"

"Let me handle this one," the marshal said. "He belongs in jail." He rode over and lifted the puncher's gun out of its holster and tossed it on the ground. "You're under arrest, feller, for resistin' an officer."

The puncher looked up at him in surprise. "You mean you're buckin' King Wallace?"

"Never even heard of the man," Mulholland said. "Wouldn't make any difference if I had."

"Wait a minute, marshal," Neil said. He rode over to confront the man. "The fat's in the fire already, so you might as well tell the truth. What's become of the rest of the crew?"

The man stared at him a moment, then shrugged. "There's no harm in tellin' you now. They've gone to meet them two-bit ranchers. King figures they'll be ridin' out here in a body



when they see the creek's dried up, and he's going to save 'em a trip." He grinned. "Killin' Pollock ain't going to help them ranchers, and it sure won't set well with King—or Bridger either."

Neil stiffened. What the man had said was true. If Warbird's crew, with its mixture of cowpunchers and gunslingers, should encounter the ranchers, the ranchers wouldn't have a chance. He whirled to face the marshal.

"They must've gone back over the short cut through Warbird and we missed 'em." He pointed at the Warbird rider. "There's no time to fool with this man now. Let him go."

The marshal frowned, then shrugged. "All right. You're callin' the shots." He motioned with his gun. "Start makin' tracks, man, before I change my mind."

The puncher glanced down at his gun in the dirt, then yanked his horse around toward town and took off at a gallop.

"What was your idea in lettin' him off easy?" the marshal asked gruffly. "He belongs behind bars."

"He'll get there yet," Neil said. "Right now he'll do us more good in the open. I want to stop Warbird before they bump into the ranchers if it's possible. I've got some mighty good friends among those little fellers. Unless I miss my guess, that puncher that just left will go like a bat straight to King Wallace. They might turn back before they meet up with Turner's bunch." He turned and saw that Stubby was watching from a distance. He cupped his hands to his mouth.

"Bring the dynamite, Stubby. Make it fast!"

The little rancher hesitated a moment, then took off for the ranch at a gallop.

"You're fixin' to blow up the dam again?" the marshal asked.

Neil nodded. "If King doesn't turn back when that puncher catches up with him, he will when he hears the blast."

He swung out of the saddle, crossed over to the dam, and began fixing a place for a dynamite charge. A sudden thought struck him and he climbed the dam and looked at the mouth of the ditch, through which water was now flowing. He turned and looked impatiently for Stubby.

In a few minutes the rancher rode into sight, carrying a package in front of him on the pommel of his saddle. Neil ran to meet him, grabbed the package out of his hands, and ripped it open. He took what he wanted and ran back to the dam. In a moment he saw that Stubby was helping him, his indecision gone. Between them they got the dynamite set and the fuse attached. Neil motioned the others away, then ran for his horse and vaulted into the saddle. From a safe distance he watched rocks and mud fly into the air as the charge exploded. He turned toward Stubblefield.

"There's enough dynamite left to start a slide that'll block that ditch. It's your property, Stubby. What do you say?"

Stubblefield grinned. "King can't kill me more than once, and I always did like playin' in the mud."

"Good." Neil swung to face the marshal. "You stay here with Stubby, marshal. I've got to ride."

The marshal seemed about to protest, then he nodded. "I wish you luck, son. You'll need it."

"Thanks." Neil held out his hand. "In case I'm *not* lucky, Cal, I want you to know I appreciate everything you've done." Without waiting for an answer, he whirled his horse and headed for Warbird.

Over at Warbird, King Wallace sat in the big bare room he used for an office. By now, he knew, Will Turner and his ranchers would be having their meeting, making their

plans to ride against him. They might even have learned that the creek had been dammed. He took a cigar out of his pocket and jammed it between his lips, forgetting to light it. They'd find him ready, damn 'em. The Warbird crew was all set to ride as soon as he gave the word.

He realized suddenly that the cigar was still unlighted. He reached in his pocket for a match, swearing as his split knuckles snagged the edge of his pocket. Instantly his mood darkened, his thoughts focusing on the argument he had had with Neil the night before. It was humiliating enough to have your wife go off and leave you; to have your son turn on you the second time was even worse. It was the only sour note of what would otherwise be a perfect day—the day on which he would finally take over the whole valley.

Instead of lighting the cigar, he tossed it angrily on the floor and got up to pace over to the window, impatient to get started. As he reached the window, he saw a horseman coming down the hill at a gallop and he recognized the man as Hub Talbert. He grabbed his hat off the desk and hurried out into the yard, where most of the Warbird crew, including Bridger, waited beside their saddled horses.

Talbert pulled his mount to a sliding stop and glanced uneasily at the mounted men, then turned his shifty eyes toward King. He moistened his lips.

"Well, you took long enough," King said roughly. "Did you have your meeting?"

Hub threw another cautious glance at the crew. "Maybe we ought to go inside, Mr. Wallace. You wouldn't want everybody to hear this."

"Oh, hell!" King said disgustedly. "Don't be so damned cagey. They know what they're here for. Start talkin'."

"Yes, sir." Talbert grinned nervously. "Well, we had our

meetin, like I said we would. We voted to ride against Warbird, takin' you by surprise." He tried to laugh, but his voice cracked. "The others are meeting at Will Turner's place about nine o'clock. I had to ride like hell to get here in time." He smiled knowingly. "I see you shut off the water, Mr. Wallace."

"Of course I did. Why do you suppose I wanted all the ranchers in town, if it wasn't so they couldn't hear the blasting?" King turned his back and gestured to Bridger. "Have my horse brought around." He took out his watch and glanced at it. "We ride in ten minutes. That'll give 'em time to get started and we can catch 'em out in the open. I don't want Mulholland swearing in a posse or anything." He started toward the house, Talbert already forgotten, but the little man's whiny voice interrupted his thoughts.

"You don't have to worry about the marshal, Mr. Wallace. Him and Neil rode out of town half an hour ago." He hesitated. "You won't forget what you promised, Mr. Wallace? You'll remember it was me that was your friend when all the others turned against you?"

King looked around sharply, irritated by the man's persistence. "I won't forget, Talbert. I'll see you get everything that's coming to you."

"Thanks, Mr. Wallace. I'd better get away from here now before somebody sees me." He turned the horse and headed back across the hill.

King drew his gun and centered the muzzle on the little man's back. "Hold on a minute, Talbert."

Talbert turned in the saddle, saw the gun, and threw up a hand in front of his body. "No! No, Mr. Wallace! I never—"

King squeezed the trigger, saw the bullet catch Talbert in the throat, then turned toward the men, who were watching in astonishment. "He would've crossed me as quick as he

did the others, like as not. Somebody drag him out of sight." He broke open the gun and punched out the empty shell, refilling the chamber with a bullet from his belt. "Where's my horse?"

"Comin', boss." Bridger was grinning. "I guess this means the war's on—no more pussyfootin'."

King nodded, reading something in Bridger's eyes that hadn't been there before.

A cowboy brought up King's big black and he swung into the saddle. Bridger still watched him speculatively. He pushed his horse closer to King and said bluntly, "Does that go for everybody—even for your kid?"

King's knuckles tightened on the reins and he felt the scab breaking. He stared at the foreman, wondering what was behind Bridger's question. Finally he said roughly, "Let me worry about that, Bridger. It ain't your problem."

"I just wanted to know." Bridger turned and motioned to the other riders. "All right, men. Keep your guns loose."

King looked at the crew. There were about fifteen of them, all the Warbird riders except Ace Pollock and one other man who were at the dam. Even Corky Brill was there, although he showed in his face that only an old puncher's loyalty to his iron made him go along. He and Duane Forbush sat a little apart from the others.

They were waiting for King to make the first move, all of them watching him. He touched his spurs to the stallion's flanks and led off across the yard, holding the animal to a conservative trot. No use in hurrying this—he'd been waiting for it long enough. Behind him, he heard the others following along, none of them having anything to say. His lips curled into a grin. Folks would remember this day for a long time—those that lived to remember anything.

They topped the hill and soon turned onto the main

road, heading toward town. King pulled his horse to a walk and waited for Bridger to catch up.

"Let me do the talking, Flake. When you see me reach for a cigar, it'll be time to open up."

"Sure, boss." Bridger's grin was fixed. He suddenly cocked his head and turned in the saddle. "Here comes somebody behind us, ridin' like hell."

King resented the distraction. "Make him go back," he said curtly. "We don't want anybody to know we're coming."

"I'll stop him." Bridger started to turn his horse, then snapped in surprise, "That looks like Munger. He's supposed to be with Ace at the dam."

King turned his mount and rode back to where the others had stopped. The Warbird rider yanked on his reins and his horse reared back on its haunches.

"Pollock's dead," he said excitedly. "Neil and the marshal came out to the dam and Neil plugged him."

King swore. "You say Neil shot him? By God, what were you doing all the time?"

The puncher licked his lips. "Lookin' down the barrel of Mulholland's gun." He shook his head. "Besides, I never figured Pollock to need any help in a gun fight, not as fast as he is—was."

King stared at the man stonily, hardly seeing him. He ought to have realized what was up when Talbert told him about Neil and Mulholland leaving town. Well, that was something that could be taken care of afterwards. Right now he had the ranchers to think about. He glanced at Bridger, whose grin had vanished.

"Looks like Mulholland finally found his backbone. Well, tell the men—"

His words died as the air reverberated with a rolling rumble like the sound of distant thunder. There was little

doubt about its origin. He stood up in his stirrups. "They've blown up the dam! By God, they ain't going to get away with it this time!" He leveled a finger at Bridger. "Send half a dozen men out on the road so they can't double around behind us. You and the others come with me. We'll take the short cut through Warbird."

"How about the ranchers? Ain't we going to take care of them first?"

"They'll still be here. Don't ask a lot of damned fool questions."

He sunk his spurs into the animal's sides and raced back the way they had just come. Behind him he heard Bridger calling out some names. Then the others took up the chase at his back. When they reached the Warbird turn-off, some of the men galloped on past, up the main road toward Box-S. Bridger drew alongside King, hollering to make himself heard.

"That question I asked, boss. About your kid. Is it still none of my concern?"

King turned to look at him, his rage almost choking him now. He shook his head. "I've got no kid, Bridger. My kid died eight years ago. Now let's quit talkin' and ride."

## Chapter Sixteen

THE EXPLOSION was still ringing in Neil's ears as he bent low in the saddle and raked his spurs along his horse's flanks, startling the animal into a frenzied gallop. There were

times when a man had to forget his usual rules and this was one of them. A horse might be ruined, but if it saved the life of one man it would be worth the sacrifice. That man might be Will Turner or Frederick Davenport, or any other of the small ranchers who had been sucked into this war through no fault of their own. Or it might be Corky Brill or one of the other decent punchers who still drew Warbird pay, and whose loyalty to their ranch would put them at King's back, regardless of their personal convictions.

Neil smiled grimly to himself. There was something crazy about this whole deal. If anyone had told him two weeks ago that he'd be blowing up a dam, that he'd be riding for a showdown with the Warbird crew—well, he would have called the man a liar. Yet he could think of nothing he had done that he didn't have to. King was his father, true enough, but the present King Wallace was a stranger, a man whose lust for revenge had killed any decent instincts he may have known eight years before. A man who would have no compunctions about shooting his own son if it meant removing an obstacle.

The horse began to falter and Neil pulled it down to a canter, knowing he couldn't afford to be put afoot by an exhausted mount, now of all times. By now, King and his crew must have started back toward the dam. Unless—Neil's fingers tightened on the reins—unless they had already met up with the ranchers and were even now throwing lead.

The horse began to run more smoothly, and Neil lifted it into a gallop again. A worried thought was tugging at his mind. Suppose, when the time came, he was unable to draw against King? Maybe a man's natural revulsion at shooting his own father would make it impossible. Yet King had to



be killed, and if this plan were to succeed, it had to be Neil who killed him. He could count on the crew not to interfere in a personal fight between a man and his son, whereas they would gun down an outsider, either one of the ranchers or Mulholland. He had to do it, but *could* he?

His horse topped the last rise before reaching Warbird, and Neil stared intently at the cloud of dust that hung over the road toward town. He pulled his mount to a stop and squinted until he was able to pick out his father's figure, atop the big black, which was being driven down the hill at breakneck speed.

Neil sucked in a deep breath. Apparently they had heard the explosion, or Ace's partner had caught up with them before they encountered the ranchers. There was that much to be thankful for. He touched spurs to his horse's sides. From the speed at which they were coming, he should be able to intercept them at about the time they reached the ranch buildings.

Flake Bridger saw him first, just as his horse reached the edge of the cleared area around the house. Neil saw the foreman turn and shout something to King, then the whole bunch of them thundered to a stop as King raised his hand. Neil pulled his own horse down to a walk and moved slowly across the yard to meet them, warned by the open savagery of King's expression. He brought his horse to a stop and let his hand fall close to his six gun.

King looked at him for a long time without speaking, his eyes dark with rage. Neil held his steady gaze on the man's eyes, but was still able to notice that Bridger, a few feet to one side of his boss, had leaned forward a little in the saddle and appeared to be waiting for some signal. The other riders had drawn aside, recognizing that this was an issue between a man and his son.

"Get out of my way." King's voice was flat, without inflection. It raised the little hairs at the back of Neil's neck, but he didn't move.

"There's no hurry," he said. "There's no one at the dam but Mulholland and Stubby. I'm the man you're after. I killed one of your gunmen. I blew up the dam."

Bridger couldn't keep quiet any longer. "Damn your guts!" he said furiously. "You shot him in the back, then. You couldn't've outdrew him. By God, I ought to—"

"Shut up, Flake." King gestured angrily, without turning his head. "I'm handling this."

"Then you'd better get at it." Bridger's tone showed no respect. "Unless you want them ranchers peckin' at our backs. They're comin' over the hill now."

"Let 'em come." King thrust his head forward, his heavy jaw jutting out at Neil threateningly. "We'll handle them ranchers when they get here. We'll handle 'em right." He lifted his reins slightly and his horse moved up a couple of steps, so that he and Neil were only a few feet apart.

"Why did you have to get messed up in this? What business is it of yours whether there's a dam or ain't one? And even if it was your business, you ought to know you can't stop me."

Out of the corner of his eye Neil saw that Bridger had edged his horse around in such a way that he would have an easy shot. He also saw that the foreman had told the truth, there were several horsemen coming down the hill. It left him without much time. In another five minutes Will Turner and his band would reach the yard and all hell would break loose.

"Damn it, answer me!"

"All right." Neil was surprised that his voice sounded calm, for his pulse was racing. "I'll tell you why it's my

business. It's because you're trying to do something no one man has a right to do. You're trying to make out like you really are a king instead of just being called one. You're trying to make slaves out of free men and you're doing it just for revenge." His voice rose. "I'll tell you something else. You're not going to get away with it. Before you can get to the dam, your ditch is going to be blown so full of rocks that it'd take you another year to open it up again."

"Give me the word, boss!" Bridger was almost begging. "Just make a sign!"

"Not yet." King's lips parted in an ugly grin. "You're lyin', Neil. There's nobody at the dam but Stubby and Mulholland, and they wouldn't have the guts." He rocked back in the saddle. "They ain't got the backbone of a snake."

"You're wrong. The same as you've been wrong all the time about a lot of things." Suddenly Neil had the answer to his question. He couldn't kill this man—couldn't draw against his own father. Yet he was positive that King wouldn't be restrained by any such scruples. It was senseless, but there it was. The thought struck him fleetingly then that he likely wouldn't have had a chance anyway, not with Bridger almost drooling to start triggering.

"Not yet, Flake," King repeated. He leaned over the pommel of his saddle. "I've got something to say before we blast this turncoat out of his saddle. I've got this to say, with everybody to hear it. You're no son of mine, Neil. Nobody with any Wallace blood in his veins could act the way you do. Your pa must've been some saddlebum that laid up with that old bitch of a mother of yours."

The harshness of his face broke into a grimace. "That got you, kid, didn't it? That's something to think about while you're dying. I just wish I could've put it up to your ma

that same way when she was breathin' her last." He turned to look quickly over his shoulder, then back at Neil. "We're going to wipe out every damned rancher in that bunch. I wish you could be here to see it, but—"

There was a terrific roar from the direction of Box-S, and King's face contorted. "By God! You wasn't lyin'!" His voice rose to a scream. "Now, Bridger! Now!" At the same time, he clawed for his gun.

Even under the lash of King's words Neil hadn't forgotten Bridger. At least he could try to take him with him, even though he couldn't defend himself against King. His gun rocked in his hand, and he saw the startled expression on the foreman's face. Bridger's gun had never levelled off and before he could bring it up Neil's second shot knocked him out of the saddle.

Another shot rang out and Neil could almost feel the thud of King's bullet against his belly, but it was only his imagination. He stared at the rancher in confusion, seeing the odd expression that was on the man's face. It was several seconds before he looked down and saw the spreading red stain on King's shirt.

Neil flashed a quick look at the group of men, but none of them held a smoking gun. Corky Brill caught his eye and lifted a finger to point. "Up there," he said. "The window."

Neil whirled to look and was just in time to see a rifle slide across a window sill and clatter to the ground. Then Francesca stood up and was framed in the window, a sad smile on her face. She stood erect in the window, her white face strangely peaceful. Every man stared at her, including the ranchers who had just ridden up.

"I had to do it," she said calmly. "I couldn't give him up—not after wasting all these years waiting for him."

Neil looked around at the two groups of men who were watching spellbound, then swung his horse over toward the house. Suddenly he stood up in the stirrups. "Don't, Francesca! You don't have to—"

Francesca let her hand fall away from her breast, and he saw the black handle of a knife. For a second she stood upright, then she sank to her knees. Her voice became faint. "Oh, my God, I am heartily sorry for—" She slumped out of sight and her voice stopped.

Neil turned away from the window, a tremor shaking him. He saw the two groups of men sitting, motionless, some of them still looking at the window, the others watching him or staring at King, who had fallen forward but was still in his saddle. For the moment the Warbird men were confused, now that their two leaders were no longer giving orders. Their confusion could vanish and they could still erupt into violence. There was only a moment in which to act. Neil had to take advantage of that moment.

"All right, men. It's all over." He pointed at two of the crew. "You two—take Bridger into the bunkhouse. He may still be alive." He allowed no uncertainty to show in his voice, and the two men dismounted and went toward the foreman. He turned to look at the ranchers, and nodded toward one of them. "Will, give me a hand with King. We've got to get him to a bed. Send one of your men to town for Doc Crumm."

He climbed down from his saddle and walked over to where King's horse was fidgeting nervously, not understanding the strange burden on its neck. In a moment Will Turner joined him. They eased King out of the saddle and laid him on the ground. He groaned and opened his eyes, staring at them confusedly. For a moment an expression akin to

anger touched his face, then it faded. "Good old Will," he said. "You outlasted me after all."

Neil forced a grin. "You're not through yet. As soon as the doctor gets here—"

King shook his head. "I'm done for, boy. You know that as well as I do." He glanced up at the window and coughed, blood flecking his lips. "I never thought she'd do it, but I don't hold it against her. You can tell her so."

Neil caught Will's eye and shook his head. "Sure," he said. "I'll tell her."

"Thanks." King was having difficulty keeping his eyes open. He turned them toward Neil. "What I was saying about your pa, boy. That was a lie. I was just—" A spasm hit him and he had to quit.

Will Turner knelt down and slipped his hand under King's head. For a moment Neil thought he was dead, but he opened his eyes again although he didn't seem to see them bending over him.

"Where's my damned horse?" he demanded. "Get my horse, Bridger. We've got to meet them ranchers. We'll show 'em who—" His voice broke off suddenly and he was dead.

Will laid a hand on Neil's shoulder. "He could've been a great man, Neil. I reckon there was something that wouldn't let him."

"Sure." Neil turned away, feeling tremendous sense of loss. He saw that the others were all watching him, waiting for some indication of what to expect. He stood facing them, trying to read their mood.

"He's dead, men. You'll take no more orders from King Wallace." He glanced at the man who had started to move Flake Bridger, and added grimly, "Nor from Bridger either. They're both dead." He singled out Corky Brill and motioned for him to move over to where Neil stood.

"Until I find out different, I'll take it for granted that I'm in charge here." He put his hand on Corky's knee and looked around at the group. "Here's your new foreman. You can take orders from him or draw your pay and leave."

The men looked at each other a moment. One of them pulled aside from the group, scowling. Neil recognized him as one of Ace Pollock's cronies.

"I'll take no orders from either one of you," he said. "I didn't hire on to punch cows."

Neil turned slightly, remembering suddenly that there was only one bullet left in his gun. "All right," he said. "If you've got any pay coming just ask for it. If not, you can start riding now."

The man eyed him narrowly for a moment, his intention easily readable in his eyes. Then he glanced down at Bridger's body and let his shoulders slump. "I'll take the money," he said. "The place owes me twenty bucks."

"Good." Neil turned away, ignoring the man. He went over to face the ranchers.

"From something my father said yesterday, I've got an idea Warbird's going to belong to me, since he didn't get to town to change his will. Anyway, no matter who takes it over, you don't have to worry about your water. The ditch is closed again, and Stubby's signed a paper to keep off trespassers. If I don't inherit the ranch, we'll manage somehow to raise enough money among us to pay off the notes, but I don't think it'll be necessary. There's no need for more trouble in the valley.

Frederick Davenport got out of his saddle and came over to shake Neil's hand. "You struck me as being a reasonable man, Neil. I'm glad I was right."

"Thanks." Neil was a little embarrassed. To change the

subject he said, "By the way, I don't see Hub Talbert around."

One of the other ranchers rode forward. "That damned rat," he said. "Talbert's the one that hired Dutch's man to blow up the dam, makin' it look like some of Dutch's work. If I ever get my hands on that little runt I'll strangle him."

Duane Forbush moved his mount closer. "If you really feel like doin' it, Jake, we can always dig him up. Personally, I don't think it'd be worth the trouble."

Jake frowned. "You mean he's dead? Who killed him?"

"King." Duane started to roll a cigarette. "Talbert came out here to tell King about the meetin' you fellers had, and King shot him."

"Well, I'll be—" Jake turned his horse. "Hey, men. Did you hear that? Talbert was double-crossin' us all the time." He paused, then pointed over their heads. "Somebody's comin' in a wagon." He shielded his eyes with his hands. "Say! That's Will's girl, drivin' like the devil was after her."

Neil ran over to meet the wagon, which braked to a stop in a cloud of dust. Marcia looked at him in surprise, then past him at the cluster of mounted men. She reached behind her for a carbine and levered a shell into place.

"Hold on," Neil said. "There's no more trouble now." He reached up and wrenched the gun out of her fingers.

Marcia looked at him confusedly. "Bridger said—" She stood up and looked more closely at the group of men, her eyes settling on Bridger's body. "Is that—?"

Neil nodded. "Bridger's dead. What was it he said?"

Marcia sank back on the wagon seat. "It doesn't matter now." Her eyes were fixed on a spot near Bridger's body. "Isn't that your father, Neil?"

Neil turned to look at King Wallace's still form, then



back at Marcia. "Yes," he said. "He was my father." He turned to face the men, waiting for one of them to speak, but they were silent.

Finally Corky Brill cleared his throat noisily. "All right, you waddies," he said. "There's work to be done. Let's get at it." He pointed at Duane Forbush. "You take one of the men and carry King into the house, then go up and look after Francesca. We'll take care of Flake afterwards."

Will Turner spoke quietly to the ranchers and two of them got down from their saddles to help carry King's body into the house. The others waited until this was done, then headed out toward town, speaking to Neil as they passed.

Neil turned to see Marcia watching him from the wagon, an understanding smile on her face. He rubbed the palms of his hands on his pants, reached up to help her down from the wagon. Hand in hand they crossed the yard and went up the steps to the front porch. Delight DuBois stood there watching them in frowning concentration, and Neil was surprised to realize that he had forgotten all about her for the last few hours.

She must have interpreted his surprise, for her frown faded and she shrugged her shoulders, then turned and went into the house and up the winding staircase.

Neil stood staring at the doorway until he became aware that Marcia had released his hand. He turned to see her looking up at him thoughtfully. "Does she still mean that much to you, Neil?"

He frowned, not understanding at first, for Delight was already out of his thoughts. When he understood her meaning he shook his head. "I was thinking about Francesca. She's dead."

"Nol" Marcia threw a hand to her face. "Not Francesca!"

He told her about it as Marcia's hand found his again, offering him silent sympathy. When he had finished, she said gently, "I think I understand how she felt. I guess she preferred it this way."

Her words shook him out of his depression and he smiled down at her. "You understand a lot of things, Marcia. Maybe you understand how I feel. Maybe you know what it is I'd like to tell you, if it were the proper time."

She nodded, brushing a strand of hair away from her eyes. "This will all pass, Neil. Warbird will be a happy place again, now that this is over. I'll still be here, waiting to hear what you want to say."

He took her by the shoulders, wanting to hold her tight and yet *not* wanting to. The things he wanted to say should be said on a happy day, not in the presence of death. He turned and looked across the yard, where the Warbird crew was already getting back at the job of running a ranch, except for two men who were riding away toward town. Duane Forbush had gotten onto the seat of Dutch's wagon and was driving the team into the shade. Neil released Marcia's shoulders and stepped over to the edge of the porch, catching Duane's attention. The puncher wheeled the wagon over beside the steps and looked up at Neil.

"Them two was just in it for the money," he said. "You're better off without 'em, boss."

Neil nodded, conscious of the word "boss." "You're likely right," he said. "We've got another one that came to Warbird for the same reason." He gestured toward the house. "I reckon she's about done packing by now. I'd like for you to go up and get her stuff and take it to the depot, and then run the wagon over to Will Turner's. You can take along a saddle horse for the ride back."

Duane nodded, then looked curiously at Marcia. "Will Miss Turner—"

"I'll see that Miss Turner gets home all right," Neil said.

"I bet." Grinning, Duane got down from the wagon seat, tied the team to one of the pillars and crossed the porch, rubbing his hands on his pants leg.

Neil turned to find Marcia looking up at him, a funny little smile on her sweet face. "My goodness!" she said. "I hope you never try to get rid of *me* that easy."

He grinned down at her. "If I do," he said. "It won't be me."