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LOUIS TRIMBLE WEST TO THE PECOS

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for a guide



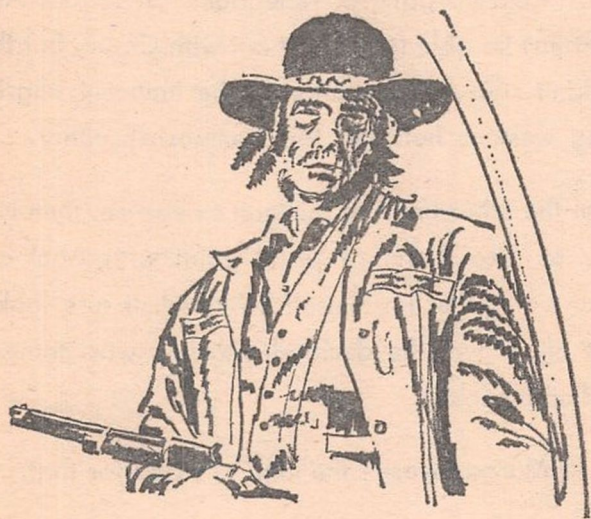
Complete Novel

It was a tough problem that Morgan Lowry faced. If he ran, it would leave both the people of the wagon train and Abel Dowling at the mercy of Crane Yancey and his gang of renegades. Of course, Abel might just be able to shoot it out with Crane, but that wouldn't stop the slaughter of the innocent pilgrims going west or hold off the Comanches either.

On the other hand, if Morgan stayed on, then he'd have to face it out at pistol point with Abel and either kill him or let himself be killed. It sure looked as if either way he decided, Morgan was going to wind up the loser.

And Morgan wasn't the kind to stand for that. . . .

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second complete novel



LOUIS TRIMBLE
WEST TO THE PECOS

ACE BOOKS, INC.

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New York, N.Y. 10036

WEST TO THE PECOS

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Louis Trimble has also written:

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STANDOFF AT MASSACRE BUTTES (G-642)
MARSHAL OF SANGAREE (G-710)

JERNIGAN

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I

WHEN MORGAN LOWRY came south from the high valley country of southern Colorado, he expected Abel Dowling to follow him sooner or later. But it wasn't until he'd rested for a time in Santa Fe that he knew Dowling planned to kill him.

Santa Fe wasn't a place Morgan took to very much. He had visited it during his days with the Cavalry and later when he was freighting. But even though he had no desire to renew old memories, it was a place to be while he tried to work out a way to fill the emptiness his life had become.

He was there nearly a week before Dowling located him. They met in an alley. Morgan was on his way to supper and it was dusk. The alley, closed in by adobe walls as it was, held mostly darkness, with the only light a bit of lampglow spilling from the rear window of a nearby cantina. Morgan wasn't even aware of Dowling until the man's stocky figure stepped into the yellow light. He held his hands loosely away from his sides in an awkward imitation of a professional gunman. But awkward or not, he had his gun tied down, and Morgan pulled up short some distance away.

"Lowry? I know it's you. I saw you turn in here."

Morgan recognized Dowling's deep, heavy voice. He said tiredly, "You should have known Crane well enough to believe my story and not his."

Morgan was honestly hoping that he might be able to convince Dowling of the truth about his half brother. But as soon as Dowling answered, Morgan knew that it was going to take more than words to shake the man's doggedly held beliefs.

Dowling said in his slow way, "It doesn't matter to me now whether or not Crane was lying about which of you killed those miner friends of his and yours and took their gold. The way you picked to kill him was enough for me. You deserve to be dead."

"Crane died in a fair fight," Morgan said.

"You call tying two sticks of dynamite to a man and blowing him to pieces a fair fight?"

"What the devil are you talking about?" Morgan was beginning to wonder if this was real, if he was truly in this alley listening to Dowling's slow, heavy voice, or if he was back in his hotel room, asleep.

"You didn't figure when you trapped him in that draw back of my south pasture that he'd get a chance to write me a note. But he did. And not knowing that is going to get you dead, Lowry—tonight. You want to hear what he wrote, Lowry? I got every word branded right into my brain."

"I want to hear it," Morgan said, remaining motionless.

"Crane wrote a good hand, thanks to all that schooling I made him get," Abel Dowling said. "He had a way with words too, and this is exactly like he wrote what happened: 'Abel, when you read this, I'll be dead. Lowry ambushed me, put a bullet in my leg, and took my horse. He left me lying while he went to find some dynamite. He said he was going to blow me apart the way he claims I helped those raiders blow up our friends. I found the strength to crawl here to the old cave and write this, figuring you might look there. I thought about hiding, but I'm afraid he'll find me and take the note and tear it up. Then you'd never know what really happened to me. Thanks for all the raising you gave a half brother. I never appreciated it enough before. Crane.'

"That's the way it read, Lowry. The exact words he put down."

"I shot him on the trail leading up to your summer grass," Morgan said quietly. "He drew first. He missed and I didn't. He went off his horse and over the edge of that deep draw at the south edge of the trail. I heard him yelling as he fell."

He might not have spoken. Dowling said, "When I found the note, I started looking for Crane. I found him—what was left—right where you blew him apart. It'd been a good week and he was pretty bad with the hot sun and all, but I buried what there was—mostly clothes and raw meat and chunks of bone."

He took a deep, half sobbing breath. "Now I'm going to pay up Crane's debt. But I'm going to do it merciful—with just a bullet."

Morgan thought, *I told Crane about the way that dynamited deer carcass saved me the night the raiders hit our mine, and he used the same trick on Abel.*

Because somehow Crane hadn't really been shot off his horse. He'd rolled over the edge of the trail, all right, but instead of falling three hundred or so feet to the bottom of the draw, he had somehow managed to land on that little ledge a couple of yards down and roll out of sight. Then he'd kicked dirt and rocks over the edge of the ledge to make Morgan think he'd gone on to the bottom. Morgan wondered how long it had taken Crane to plan that scheme and practice it until he was certain it would work. And how long it had taken him to learn that scream that faded off like a man falling farther and farther away.

No matter, Morgan thought; that was the only way it could have happened. Crane had gone to a lot of trouble to make both Morgan and Abel Dowling think he was dead. And he must have known right where Morgan was hiding, waiting for him, or he wouldn't have set his trap in the right place. And knowing that, he could have ambushed Morgan easily enough and got rid of him for good.

But he hadn't. He'd let Morgan live. And somewhere he was still alive too. And since Crane wasn't a charitable man, Morgan knew that he'd had a reason for doing everything he'd done there on the ranch. He'd figure out that reason in time, Morgan was sure—if he lived long enough.

Dowling took a deep, steadying breath and started his draw. Morgan moved his right hand and his gun was up and aimed before Dowling's gun finished clearing leather. Morgan could see the bleakness of failure on the other's face.

"Now it's your turn to listen . . ." Morgan began.

"Kill me, damn you!"

"No," Morgan said. "I told you the truth. To kill you would be making a lie out of that."

He sought for just the right words to make Dowling understand—and believe—that his brother was still alive, that Crane had tricked them both. But before he could speak, Dowling turned and disappeared into a narrow gut between two buildings.

Morgan returned to his hotel, packed his gear, and headed

out of Santa Fe. His first thought was to go after Crane and finish the job he thought he had taken care of in Colorado. But the hunger for revenge left him quickly and the emptiness came back. He had no real desire to chase Crane any longer. Yet when he faced up to the future, he knew that he had to go on hunting.

He had to find Crane and at the same time he had to lead Abel Dowling along the same trail. He had to make Abel see that his brother was still alive. Until then, Abel Dowling would continue to hunt him in that slow, methodical way. And as long as he did, Morgan would know no rest, would have no chance to even consider a future for himself.

Morgan laughed bitterly at himself. Think of the future? He could scarcely remember when he had made plans beyond the day he faced. After the raiders hit the mine, he had thought of nothing but finding the four men who had killed his friends and just missed killing him. He'd located the one called Shorty and learned that Crane was the ring-leader; then Morgan had turned his back on the other two and gone after Crane, who'd been his friend for all the long, slogging months they'd put in at the mine.

Now he had to plan again. And as he rode, he worked his mind back into old patterns, the kind that had led him to Crane. He had to try again to figure out why Crane had done the things he had, and then try to guess what Crane would do next—and where he would do it. And he had to remember that Crane was clever and devious, that this was a man without a conscience. And that above all Crane was a man driven by greed and a desire for power.

Morgan let the smoke drift south toward El Paso, asking questions wherever he could. Crane, with his almost boyish face, his cold blue eyes and his quick, lean body, was not a hard man to describe. And even if he now called himself Crane Yancey—taking his real father's name back, Morgan realized—he was easy enough to trace for a time.

Finally, at the Pecos, news of Crane turned him north-eastward, up the Dante Cutoff. And there he lost Crane, and almost lost himself.

II

MORGAN REACHED Burntgrass hollow-eyed and on foot, not trusting the bony smoke gelding to carry what remained of his usual hundred and eighty pounds along with his saddle, his soogans, and his empty saddlebags.

Threading his way through the crazy quilt of tents and sad shacks that made up the town, Morgan stopped before a tied-together line of tents that labeled themselves as a livery and blacksmith shop.

The blacksmith was working at his forge, sleeves rolled up and sweat dripping off him. He paused and studied Morgan and Morgan's horse, and grunted.

"He don't look so far gone that a few feedings wouldn't perk him up," the blacksmith finally said.

"I'm in about the same shape," Morgan said. "So feed him and tell me where there's a decent place to eat."

Doubt showed under the sweat glistening on the man's face. Pointedly, he let his eyes move over Morgan's tattered clothes, his boots with the soles flapping, his hatless head. "It'll take a heap of food for either of you. And everything costs dear this far out in the middle of noplance."

He seemed about to say more but a horse in the rear tent began to kick up a fuss and he started off to tend to it. Morgan called, "Where can I eat and stay healthy? And clean up some?"

"Three tents down and turn right past Rusty's Saloon. That's the hotel. But they only got one bathtub. If I was you, I'd try the river." As Morgan shouldered his nearly empty saddlebags, he threw out, "Clothing store next to the hotel."

The hotel tried to sell him a bed in a broiling canvas room with bunks lined up tighter than a wartime prison camp. Morgan thought about the open coolness by the river and backed away. He went into the hotel dining room and took a seat at one of the long, splintery board tables. The tent flaps were up at both ends so that the hot wind, along with the flies and an occasional lost grasshopper, found its way inside. The meat was badly cooked, the potatoes burned,

and the bread dough centered, but it was food and Morgan ate the way a man who hadn't seen real food for over eight days would eat. Then he sat drinking water and coffee until the waitress threatened to charge him extra for the space he was taking up.

The food and liquid had helped clear some of the lightness out of his head and he began to recall all the equipment he had left strewn back along that faint trail or scattered over the great rolling sand dunes the Comanches had run him and two Kiowas into. Stopping at one store and then another, he ended with his saddlebags considerably heavier than when he'd left the livery.

Back at the ramshackle livery-blacksmith shop, Morgan squatted and lit a cheroot, his first smoke in over ten days. His voice was casual. "Earlier you said something about the trails going south and west. I got to wondering if any other damn fool but me'd come up from that way recently."

"One," the blacksmith answered. "But I was thinking more of the wagon party that intends to go down that way tomorrow."

Morgan blew a smoke ring and stabbed his cigar through it. "Why would any wagon party choose to go through that country?"

"This is a bunch from the East on their way to California. They figure on picking up the Butterfield route this side of El Paso."

"They'll more likely pick arrows out of their hides," Morgan said. "Or bullets—depending on which they meet first, Indians or one of the trail gangs."

"Tell that to Henry Kortner. He's their guide." The blacksmith gestured at a line of horses. "These belong to them. All shod and waiting. They got fair wagons too."

"Kortner?" Morgan echoed. "He's no guide I ever heard of."

"Go down to the California Saloon. He'll tell you all there is to know about being a guide. Got it out of books."

"Some people should never get educated," Morgan commented. He got off his haunches and started away. With studied casualness, he stopped and turned back. "A while ago you said something about a man who'd come up from the south and west. He wouldn't have been stocky built

with dark hair tight curled and a white scar puckering the edge of his left eye?"

The blacksmith laid down his sledge and spat. "That ain't much of a description," he said dryly. "The kind I like tells how many hairs a man has growing out of a mole on the left side of his neck."

Normally that kind of humor would have brought a broad grin from Morgan. But he had no room for smiling, not when it was a matter of Abel Dowling. Because he had a mole on the left side of his neck, between his collar top and his ear, and three stiff black hairs grew out of it.

"Three hairs," Morgan said. "When did he get here?"

"Two days back. He rode out yesterday and said he'd be back later. Where do I tell him he can find you?"

"You don't," Morgan said. "I'll find him and spring a little surprise."

"That's right friendly of you," the blacksmith observed.

Morgan said thinly, without too much hope, "There wasn't another stranger here around the same time—a lean one with a kid's face and blue eyes. He favors black horses with blazed faces."

"No," the blacksmith said in a positive tone. Morgan started away. The man added, "But about a month ago there was a lean one here with eyes like chunks off a blue-cold icicle, a tied-down gun, and a black gelding wearing a star on its face."

Morgan stopped and let out his breath softly. "You don't miss much," he said.

The blacksmith shrugged. "They come, they go, and most of them stop here for one reason or another."

"You talk a lot too," Morgan said without rancor. "Does every customer get the same service?"

"Not every customer gives me honest gold for a few dollars' worth of work."

"If I had the name of the kid-faced one, you might even see more honest gold," Morgan said deliberately.

The blacksmith picked up his hammer and hefted it thoughtfully. "Now I could tell you that most men don't leave their names—no more'n you did. But this one's horse was wearing a funny brand—a big Y with a half loop hooked to the top of the left fork, and I asked him how it read.

"That's the *see why* brand," he said. "Anybody sees it knows why they better keep their hands off whatever is wearing it."

"Why?" Morgan asked. He brought another gold piece up from his pocket and held it poised on the thumbnail, ready to flip it to the blacksmith.

"I asked him the same. He said, 'Because they know whatever wears that brand belongs to Crane Yancey. And nobody takes anything away from him. Not if they want to stay healthy.'"

"It sounds like he was trying to call attention to himself," Morgan said thoughtfully. "Did anyone ask for him—the man with the mole maybe?"

"Nobody but a joker with a beard as rough as an uncombed mane and a voice straight out of a coal cellar. He asked about a week after this Yancey rode out."

Morgan snapped his thumb. The blacksmith caught the spinning gold coin and pocketed it. "Yancey didn't say where he was going and I ain't seen him or the one with the mole since," he offered.

Morgan nodded his thanks and went off, leaving his saddlebags. He found the California Saloon a few tents down and one row over. A glance inside showed him no one resembling Abel Dowling, and he went to the bar and ordered beer. It wasn't much, not the way he had dreamed of beer during those long, hot days in the dry country, but it was wet. He drained it quickly and asked for another.

He sipped this slowly, thinking of Dowling and wondering when he would come back. Morgan supplied the answer to his own question: Dowling would return as soon as he realized Morgan was not somewhere ahead of him. He might even be here now, or on his way into town.

Morgan wished that Dowling would run into Crane. That could save him a lot of trouble. It could save him from running again. It could save him from having to come face to face again with Abel Dowling someday.

And it would save him having to kill the man.

III

MORGAN FOUND his mind turning to another of the blacksmith's remarks. It wasn't enough, he thought sourly, that he had Abel Dowling and Crane Yancey to concern himself with. Now he had to worry about a whole wagon train of people he'd never seen—and for that matter, might never see.

Morgan was in the middle of his second beer when a group of men came in and bellied up to the bar. He heard the big, florid-faced man in the middle of the group addressed as Kortner and he sidled a bit toward them.

Kortner downed a beer in two swallows and thumped his mug down for another. Apparently he'd been arguing with the rough-bearded man on his right and he said now, "All right, maybe it isn't the fanciest job in the world. But it's going to get me to California—where the dirt's so rich it sprouts food without a man's doing any work." He held up his big hands. They were smooth and well-kept, to match the neatly trimmed, dark blond spade beard he sported and the dandyish outfit he wore.

"That's what I want," he went on, "to crunch fine, rich dirt between my fingers. To make things grow out of my own sweat."

The rough-bearded man laughed. "Maybe you'll do it—if you live. But how do you figure on getting that six wagon outfit from here to California before the snows catch you in the mountains?"

The heat obviously bothered Kortner. He spent a good deal of time mopping at the sweat channeling off his forehead. He patted at himself with a soggy handkerchief now. "There shouldn't be any problem," he said. "I intend to go south."

"South? Man, do you know what you're getting into? And from your own mouth you ain't been west of St. Louis before this!"

"The first man who took a train out didn't have experience either," Kortner said stiffly. "Nor did many a one that followed. But they made it. And they left records. I've read those. I know where I'm going."

His finger stabbed into the wet ring left by his mug on the polished bartop. "We're here." His finger moved, drawing a line some distance away. "This is the Pecos. We'll pick up the Cavalry there and go on until we run into the Butterfield route. We'll be crossing the California desert by fall."

"And just how do you figure on getting from here to the Pecos? Did the books you read tell you that too?"

With his competence in question, Kortner drew himself up with dignity. "They did, Mr. Forkness. That's exactly what they did." His finger moved again. "West to here and then south to the hills here. And then southwest along the Dante Cutoff."

Morgan could restrain himself no longer. When the man called Forkness changed his attitude and said admiringly, "By God, I think maybe you got something. You'll save a heap of time going that way," Morgan eased to Kortner's free side and poked his own finger into the crude map drawn on the bar.

"Do you know why they call it the Dante Cutoff?"

Kortner turned. "The literary allusion hasn't escaped me," he said icily. "But remember, Dante went to Paradise as well as to Hell."

"The gents that named the Cutoff never read that part," Morgan said dryly. "But they knew all about Dante's Inferno. And they meant it every way you want. Hot as hell in summer, cold as hell in winter, muddy as hell when it rains, alkali dust choking you sure as hell when it's dry and the wind blows. There are only two decent springs on the whole trail, and if the Indians aren't camped at them, the trail robbers will be. They're the only kinds you'll find on that cutoff—Comanche, Kiowa, and cutthroats."

"I've heard all the arguments," Kortner said.

Morgan shrugged. "You'll never get through," he said. "It's quite a responsibility, taking six wagons full of people into country like that."

"You making the trip?" Forkness demanded truculently. He thrust his face past Kortner, toward Morgan. His small eyes glared with surprising fervor considering that he had no more personal stake in this than Morgan had.

"I made it," Morgan said quietly. "I came up from the south this morning."

He felt the impact of all the men's anger. They were enjoying the prospect and he was trying to take that pleasure away from them. He wanted no fighting now, no brawling, no calling attention to himself. Turning, he walked out, leaving his unfinished beer on the bar, wondering why he should fret himself about this.

His path carried him beyond the clusters of tents to a wide, shallow spot in the river, obviously the ford. On the other side was a sprawling barren flat, its edges marked by browning dry grass. A few milk cows, calves and some fair looking saddle horses were trying to find food there. In the center of the dusty bare spot, six assorted wagons were formed in a circle as if ready to repel an Indian attack.

This must be the group Kortner was going to guide, Morgan thought, and he felt his concern increase. He had seen all kinds of vehicles on the western trails at one time and another, but never had he seen a collection like this for such a long, dangerous trip. Forming the circle were two solid looking prairie schooners, a spring wagon made over by a canvas top into a prairie vehicle, a mud wagon with its sides boarded up, another strange hybrid affair reminiscent of a war ambulance cart, and a Conestoga wagon.

Shaking his head, Morgan turned to go back. The sun, coming slantwise from the northwest sky, struck him in the eyes, and for an instant he was blinded. He had one foot in the air and was swinging his weight when he felt the impact of something soft. He was jolted backward and did an awkward dance to regain his balance. He finally got both feet on the ground and the sun glare out of his eyes.

For a moment he saw nothing. Then his eyes lowered and he found himself looking into the furious features of a more than ordinarily attractive girl. She sat in the dust, a green and white checked sunbonnet awry on her chestnut hair and a matching dress scooted up so that one ankle showed. Hazel eyes sparkled angrily at him as her hands pawed around to gather in the half dozen packages scattered about her.

His mouth was open to apologize, but the sight of her

sitting there and the indignation on her fine features made him burst out laughing instead.

"You—you oaf!" she cried.

She had a rich voice, as attractive as her face and figure, and the quiver in it made Morgan want to laugh again. But he swallowed back the desire and bent to pick up her packages. When his hand reached for one in crumpled wrapping, she shouldered him hastily aside and reached for it herself. As she clumsily tried to replace the paper the whole affair fell out of her hands, the wrapping going one way and some undergarment another.

Morgan thrust the parcels he had rescued into her arms, tipped his hat, and walked a few steps toward town. He turned his back to her. "When it's safe for me to look, say so."

He heard no answer but soon there came the sound of soft footfalls and he turned. She was striding quickly toward the circle of wagons, having already picked her way across the shallow ford.

Morgan was about to go about his own business when he saw a package of food the girl had missed. Picking it up, he started after her. He opened his mouth to call; then with a chuckle he followed her silently instead, walking slowly to keep his long stride from catching up with her.

He was a good twenty paces behind when she reached the circle and climbed into the second prairie schooner. He strolled to it and squatted down in its thin shade. He filled his pipe of dried out tobacco and puffed while he waited for her to reappear. She did so soon, stepping down and turning to meet him full face. She gasped.

"You! Do you want me to call someone or will you stop bothering me?"

Morgan held out the package. "You left this. I figured that you might need it where you're going." He juggled the package and his pipe and removed his hat. "And I came to apologize. I shouldn't have laughed."

She almost snatched the package from his hand. "Thank you—no, you shouldn't have." She turned and started away.

Morgan remained where he was for a moment. The girl disappeared into the lead wagon. He started a leisurely stroll around the circle, studying the conglomeration of convey-

ances with a professional eye. None, he noticed, was badly built, even though some obviously had a homemade air about them. Despite that, he judged that overall the wagons were equal to the well-kept horses the blacksmith had said belonged to these people. They were not, then, trying to get west on frayed cinches and a can of beans.

He was about to leave when a gentle voice said, "Are you our new member?"

Morgan saw a heavy-set man in early middle age, gray shooting through his neat moustache and goatee. The pallor of city living had not yet fully left his skin but he looked healthy enough.

Morgan said, "I'm just passing the time. The young lady dropped a package and I returned it."

"Ah," the man said, "you're the one." He smiled. "I thought you might be the extra man our guide went to hire."

"No." Morgan shook his head. "It wasn't in my mind to go west." He thought a moment. "It's unusual to find a wagon train short of men. Usually it's the other way around."

"One of our members took sick and died before we left Westport Landing," the man said. "It left us with one wagon lacking a man for the heavy chores."

Morgan wanted to say something about the route these people were going to take, but he curbed himself. It was none of his affair, and he doubted if talk would change their minds. It would only cause them unease. With a nod, he left the man and started for town.

The sun was thinking about setting and he found himself hungry again. He fought down another meal of badly cooked food, considered washing the taste away with a beer, and decided it was too hot to stay inside a tent. Instead, he strolled toward the livery to see how his horse was getting along.

The blacksmith was working by lantern light, the hoof of a rangy bay turned up between his legs while he finished nailing on a shoe. Dropping the hoof down, he straightened up with a push at the small of his back.

"If you're in a hurry to move out, you better do some horse trading," he said amiably. "That one of yours needs at least two weeks before it can travel good."

"I figured as much," Morgan admitted. He squatted down

and began to fill his pipe. "What made you think I might be in a hurry to move out?"

"Stranger came through late this afternoon from the west. Gabby type. Nervous too."

Morgan wondered if the man was going to want more money in exchange for what he had to say, but he went on. "He stopped at the California Saloon for a drink. Said he saw a couple of trail robbers in there. A big one with a rough beard and a voice like a big drum, and a long-faced one looking like a horse."

Morgan felt a long moment of stillness close over him. Those men had been two of the group with Kortner.

"What has all this to do with me?" he asked bluntly.

"Maybe nothing. Only the stranger also said he shared a camp two days ago with a lean young fellow who had eyes like chunks of ice and rode a blaze-faced black gelding."

The blacksmith fell silent. Morgan said quietly, "Was he alone?"

"The stranger didn't say, but he claimed that the way the young fellow was camped, it looked as if he was settled in to wait there awhile."

Morgan got off his haunches. So Crane had gone west, but only a two day horseback ride from here. And if the stranger could be believed, he was waiting for someone or something.

Crane wasn't waiting for *him*, Morgan knew. Nor would he be waiting for his brother Abel. Of all the men he'd want to avoid, Abel would be the one.

What Abel had done after leaving Burntgrass, Morgan couldn't know. But he was willing to lay a bet that Dowling had gone on east, hoping to get information to lead him on to Morgan. And when he didn't find any, Morgan was sure, he would come back through here to ask his questions again.

And that made Morgan's decision as to his next move an easy one. Since leaving Santa Fe, his one thought had been to lead Abel to Crane so that Dowling could see for himself the living proof of Crane's lie. And since Crane was west of here, then Morgan would have to go in that direction too—first making sure that Abel Dowling would hear about it.

Besides that, there was his foolish—and maybe pointless

—concern for the wagon party Kortner was planning to guide down the Dante Cutoff. Because just maybe Kortner wasn't the windbag he seemed to be. He'd been in the California Saloon with a man who fit the description of a trail robber, and even if they had acted like they hadn't known one another long, the way Kortner had so carefully laid out his trail west and south could have been more than empty boasting.

Morgan said, "If you can spare the time, I feel like doing a little horse buying."

"Give me five minutes," the blacksmith said, and disappeared into his line of tents.

Morgan stood and thought about Crane Yancey and Abel Dowling. He added the rough-bearded stranger, his side-kick and the prosperous looking wagon party that had hired Kortner, and he didn't much care for the total he got.

Temporarily, he put Abel Dowling to the back of his mind and tried to figure out why Crane would be camped just to the west of Burntgrass, if he still was. One thing was certain: Crane wasn't out there to lend a helping hand to tired travelers.

IV

THE BLACKSMITH broke into Morgan's thoughts. He came out of the tent leading a skittish little bay gelding with his left hand and packing a saddle in his right.

"I ain't got as much as I'd thought," he said apologetically. "This is all I could find, and he ain't broke too good. So I'll let him go for a hundred dollars."

"He doesn't sound worth too much," Morgan said. He went up to the horse and ran a hand over its muzzle. He approached from dead in front and because the liveryman had a grip on the left side of the bridle, Morgan ran his hand along the right. The bay merely blinked an eye at him.

Morgan grinned. "I'll hold him while you put the saddle on."

He took the liveryman's place so that the horse could see him best from its left eye. Trying to get the saddle on took some doing until Morgan quietly eased over to the right.

Then the animal stood patiently. Once the saddle was cinched down, Morgan made a show of slipping up from the rear and stepping fast into the stirrup. The bay shied on him as he caught the horn and pulled himself aboard and it kept spooking until he dropped to the ground and moved up to take the bridle on the right side.

"Forty dollars gold and I'll finish breaking him," Morgan offered.

"Fifty."

"I'll buy," Morgan said. "You must have been pretty sure of a sale, seeing that's my saddle you put on him."

"You look like a man who can handle horses," the liveryman said.

"You earn your money," Morgan said dryly at the compliment. He added, "If you can sell me a pack saddle, I'll take the smoke along. At the speed I'll be going, he can fatten up on the trail. And throw in a sack of grain."

While the liveryman went back into his tent-stable, Morgan busied himself putting his saddlebags and soogans onto the bay. When the man returned, Morgan checked the pack saddle that had been put on the smoke, nodded approval at the way a good watering and feeding and a treatment for its hooves had fixed the horse, and hoisted the sack of grain the liveryman gave him onto the smoke's saddle.

The liveryman totted up the charges and Morgan paid. Then the man squinted at the sky. "I smell a storm. I brought this old slicker to throw over the grain sack. It ain't much but . . ."

Morgan took the tattered oilskins. "My thanks," he said, lashing the slicker down over the sack. With a nod, he approached the bay from the right side and hoisted himself easily into the saddle. The small horse merely stood. The liveryman gaped.

Morgan said, "An Indian sold you this horse."

"He did. But he had a bill of sale on it. He owned it legal. But how'd you know? And how come he stands easy like that now?"

"A lot of Indians break their horses from the right side. So do some Mexicans. Remember that the next time you have to knock down a price because a horse isn't well broke."

The liveryman laughed and slapped his thigh. "By God,

you tricked me on a horse trade! I ought to take back the slicker."

"If you didn't make a hundred percent profit, I'll eat these reins," Morgan gibed.

"No need," the liveryman said, laughing again. He squinted at the sky again. "You bound on riding out tonight? That smells like a powerful storm coming."

"I'd as soon get a little start," Morgan said. "There should be some shelter a ways out of town."

"That wagon train Kortner's taking is leaving in the morning," the liveryman said. "They come and got their stock earlier. Maybe you could bed down under one of their wagons."

Morgan chuckled a little, thinking of the girl he had met this afternoon. With a final nod of thanks, he started off on the bay, leading the smoke.

The first drops of rain fell as he reached the shallow ford. A streak of blinding white split the sky to the south and not too far off thunder rumbled. The liveryman was right about the storm, Morgan decided. It was going to be a big one while it lasted. He hurried the horses across the water and toward the wagon encampment.

He could see their lights now and make out a bit of movement. As he drew closer, flashes of lightning showed him that stock was being driven into a corral made by the circle of wagons and a taut rope. Then he noticed the girl he had upset earlier. She was leading a milk cow, her body bent forward against a sudden gusty wind that came hot and wet across the flat country. Beside her, the goateed man dragged one of the horses. Neither animal seemed to want to move.

A bolt of lightning plunged down, striking not thirty feet away. The air filled with its raw smell and the thunderclap was loud enough to batter a man's hat from his head. With a snort of terror the cow jerked free from the girl's grip and galloped awkwardly into the darkness. The horse got loose and followed, loping ahead of the cow and into the night.

Morgan freed the smoke and told it to stand. He reined the bay around and rode off in a wide circle. Lightning showed him both animals, the horse well ahead and running in blind terror for nowhere. Morgan caught its trailing reins

just before it would have gone over the lip of a shallow draw. The rain was lashing down now, wind driven and blinding him, but he held the reins long enough to get them tied to his cante. Catching the lumbering cow was easier, and he used his rope to lead her.

He tried riding back to the wagon train but the wind and the rain made it impossible for him to see. He turned the bay and the other animals' tails to the gale and rode it out. The storm crackled its way north and began to ease off. Then Morgan turned and went back to the waiting smoke. Bringing it along, he rode to the nearest wagon.

The goateed man was standing miserably with the last of the rain streaming down his hat and onto his shoulders. Light from the prairie schooner behind him splayed out so that he could see Morgan and what he had.

"Ah, we meet again! My thanks for this. Allow me to pay you. . . ."

"A place for my horses in the corral and a right to bed down under one of your wagons will do me fine," Morgan interrupted.

"You could have had that anyway."

Morgan smiled at the formal tone, so reminiscent of his father. He led the animals into the corral as the man dropped the rope. Once the horses were unsaddled and settled, he took the time to look around. The goateed man said, "I think Nora Fuller would feel safer if you chose her wagon to bed under. She's a woman alone now that her father's dead."

He indicated the wagon Morgan had seen the girl enter that afternoon. Morgan nodded, took his gear to the wagon, and put it underneath. He went back to the goateed man and held out his hand. "My name is Morgan," he said.

"Athelstan Pardee, sir," the man introduced himself. They shook hands briefly. "I could ask you to share my wagon except that our guide has chosen it for his headquarters."

"I'll be fine under there," Morgan assured him. He crawled wetly under his shelter, arranged his saddle for a pillow, unrolled his soogans, removed his boots, and sprawled back.

Morning brought hot sunshine to turn the new mud back to dust once more. Canvas steamed in the early freshness,

and Morgan awoke to the smell of coffee and the sound of a fire crackling. Pulling on his boots, he rolled into the open. The circle made by the wagons had been cleared of stock to make room for the cooking.

Morgan turned away and walked to the river. The water was cool and took the last of the night's sleep from his eyes. Running a hand over the bristles on his jaw, Morgan returned to the girl's wagon, pulled his saddle and blankets into the sunshine to dry, and then stood warming himself. Pardee came to ask him to join them for a meal.

There was but one fire, with the group eating around it in community fashion. Morgan was introduced by Pardee, who gave no names to the others, and was given a cup of coffee to hold him while flapjacks were cooked.

"I have my own food," Morgan said. "There's no need to waste yours on me."

A woman with the determined look of a professional mother silenced him. "We have more than enough. Now take this coffee and stand aside."

Amused, Morgan stood aside. Neither Kortner nor Nora Fuller was there, he noticed. But all the others seemed to be—Pardee and the woman who had spoken; a middle-aged man, with the beaten look of one who might be her husband; a pair of twelve year old twins standing next to the man; a giggling young couple, obviously freshly married; and two couples with the dirt-seamed faces of farmers, one with a boy about seventeen and the other with a girl a bit younger. The thinner of the farm women held a baby in her arms.

The girl had been standing smiling at the boy but now she edged toward Morgan, nibbling at her lips to redden them.

Morgan smiled politely at her. "I'm Beth Tisdale," she said. "Isn't this exciting?"

A tall, dried-looking woman who looked like the girl called tartly, "Beth, come and help me serve these flapjacks."

The girl pouted and hurried away. Morgan caught the boy glaring at him and shook his head wearily. Then Nora Fuller stepped down from her wagon, wearing a blue and white checked dress, her chestnut hair caught in a pigtail,

making her look fresh and young. She was almost to the fire when she saw Morgan.

"I should thank you for saving our stock last night, I suppose," she said in a voice meant only for him.

"Why, no, ma'am," he said in a heavy voice. "I didn't save the stock. I sent the lightning to frighten it away."

She tried to look angry, but despite herself she laughed. "I earned that, didn't I? I really meant to thank you."

Before he could answer, Kortner came striding up from the direction of Burntgrass. Someone thrust a cup of coffee into his hand and voices asked eagerly when they were leaving and if he'd found a helper.

Obviously enjoying the attention, Kortner stood importantly by the fire. "We'll leave as soon as breakfast is over," he said. "And I found a man to help. He came into Burntgrass late last night. He has some business but he should join us in two or three days."

Excitement took over, washing around Morgan and isolating him. Someone pushed a plate of hotcakes in his hand, filled his coffee cup, and moved away. He backed from the fire and found Kortner beside him.

Kortner sucked noisily on his coffee. "Pardee tells me you stayed the night here. Why are you hanging around us?"

"It was raining. I needed shelter." Morgan added softly, "Don't worry. I haven't given you away."

Kortner bristled. "What does that mean?"

"That you don't know much about what you're doing. Oh, you might have read some old books, but you didn't read the right ones. As I told you, the wagons need repacking, and that stock is fine but it isn't the kind to make this trip."

"Horses are in short supply," Kortner said. "I did the best I could. As for the wagons, I took what I could get."

"They'll do—if they don't break down from things banging around inside."

"I'll talk to the folks about repacking."

Morgan took a bite of his breakfast. "I hope this man who's coming to help knows the trails."

"He came up from the southwest not long ago."

"And he still hasn't sense enough to tell you to keep on the main road?"

Kortner reddened. "I promised Pardee and his people

that I'd save them travel time. I intend to keep that promise."

"You'll save them travel time getting into heaven," Morgan said dryly. He walked away.

He had the bay saddled and the smoke loaded with the sack of grain when Pardee came up to him. "You're leaving us? Was it something Kortner said to you?"

"We had a personal difference on the best trail," Morgan said. "Every man thinks he knows the best and quickest way west."

"Ah, then you've been on some of the trails going west?"

"Yes." Morgan touched the brim of his hat and reined the bay away from Pardee.

"Wait! Can't you ride with us until Kortner's helper catches up? We need a man to handle the stock and to teach us how to do it. We'll pay you for your time."

Morgan thought of the slowness of the wagon train and of having to live with Kortner's open antagonism; and then he thought of his own problem—of Crane's possibly being still camped up ahead.

"I'll think it over," he said. "I'll ride ahead now and meet you by the creek you'll reach at stopping time."

He rode away slowly, turning things over in his mind. Crane had been camped two days out by horseback. That was from four to five days by wagons, at the speed these moved. And what would he do if he did ride on alone, Morgan wondered. Just catching Crane would be of no use to him. Somehow he had to bring Crane and his brother together. If he was alone and he found Crane the same way, there could well be a showdown between them. And that would defeat Morgan whether he won or lost.

Nor did he want to get too far ahead of Abel Dowling this time, not with the first real chance he had had of possibly getting Abel and Crane to meet.

But what if Abel Dowling should appear before Morgan knew where Crane might be? Morgan grunted. It was a problem he would face if it came about. Until then, he decided, he would stay with the wagon party.

THE FOURTH DAY out from Burntgrass Morgan was working easily with the members of the wagon party. His decision to stay with them until the new man caught up seemed to please everyone but Kortner. He continued to act as if every move of Morgan's was designed to show him up for a fool.

Even so, as the small train worked its way across the hot Texas countryside, Morgan began to understand how Kortner had got himself this job. The man was a born organizer. With easy authority, he set the wagons in the pattern that was most efficient for traveling, he appointed people to clear-cut responsibilities, and he kept things running with surprising smoothness.

Where the stock was concerned, he deferred—ungraciously—to Morgan. So far, Morgan had found out, it wasn't enough of a job to make an extra man worthwhile. And with so few head to bother about, he found time hanging heavily around his neck. More than once, he thought again of how much better time he and his two horses could be making alone.

That fourth night they camped by a stream. It was growing toward evening and Morgan, riding ahead a short distance, stopped at the edge of the bluff some fifteen feet above the shallow trickle of water. When Kortner came alongside, Morgan said, "This is the last water for a good six hours at the pace this train moves."

Kortner wiped sweat from his forehead and lowered his eyes to avoid the sharp slant of the late sun. "Then we'll stop here," he said, making it sound as if this was his decision. "That sandflat down by the water is a good place. It's big enough for a tight circle and it'll be cooler than up here. Water's easier to get to."

Morgan looked at the southern sky. There was little to see but a faint, distant haze. He said, "I suggest you keep the camp here. Then if a gully-washer comes, you'll be high and dry." He added, "Unless you aim to float the train south."

"No matter what I suggest, you always have to have a different idea," Kortner said sourly.

"Not always," Morgan answered. "I watched the way you handled organizing the train. You did a fine job."

"I'm glad you find me useful for something."

The man was pettish as a girl, Morgan thought. He said, "Everybody has to learn, and one way is by not making other folks' mistakes. More than one wagon train has been lost by being too close to water when a storm hits. This isn't gentle country."

"I see no signs of rain," Kortner said, "but I'll not risk any chance of endangering these people." Turning, he went back to the lead wagon, calling, "We'll camp here on the bluff, folks!"

Morgan let Kortner give all the orders for setting up the camp, contributing only by helping Nora swing her horses into line when one of them decided to get fractious. Later, at supper, he complimented Kortner openly on a well organized camp.

Dinner over and the camp redded up for the night, Kortner assigned the watches, taking the first for himself. Morgan, feeling uneasy because of faint flickers of light off to the south, left his bed under Nora Fuller's wagon and began checking the ropes that formed the makeshift corral where the stock was penned. Kortner finally came over to him.

"I appreciated your remark tonight," Kortner said with surprising diffidence. "Everybody seems to think you know a lot about this country. Your saying that helped me in their eyes."

"I spoke the truth," Morgan answered. He opened a knot, took up some slack in a rope, and retied it.

Kortner's answer was drowned by a sky-shredding burst of thunder. It came so close on the end of a lightning bolt that the two seemed to blend into one.

"Watch the stock!" Morgan warned, and ducked under the rope. He moved quickly to soothe the restless animals as the lightning and thunder began to flash and hammer directly overhead. The wind followed, clawing at the canvas coverings of the wagons, sweeping in sandy dirt with cutting force. And finally the rain came. The wind brought it in flat, almost parallel to the ground—driving bullets of tight-packed wetness that forced the stock to turn tail and

huddle against the far side of the circle, straining against the ropes stretched there between the wagons.

Fighting for breath that the wind kept snatching away, Morgan worked to triple the strands of rope. He felt someone beside him, helping, and then someone else. But it wasn't until the main fury of the storm had passed that he was able to recognize Tim Boyle and Beth's father, Sam Tisdale.

They stood by the ropes, talking soothingly to the frightened animals, and watched the lightning carry the thunder off to the north, and felt the rain ease away as the wind blew it past them. With startling suddenness the stars came out and the cool cleanness of fresh air washed over them.

"Thanks," Morgan said.

Tim grunted and walked soggily back to his wagon. Tisdale took off his hat and slapped water out of it. "The boy's touchy about that girl of mine." He spat. "I can't seem to keep her curbed."

"It'll work out," Morgan said. "It usually does." He moved away, scattering the stock away from the ropes. "A fire'd go good about now," he called back.

His work done, Morgan left the corral and walked to the edge of the bluff. He found Kortner there, staring down at the creek, roiling now less than three feet from where he stood.

"Your advice was right," Kortner said. "Again."

Morgan took his pipe apart and tried to blow the bowl dry. "The time will come when you wish you had a few inches of that, muddy or not," he observed.

"The way you talk, no wagon train ever got through the country below here." Kortner was edging toward belligerence again.

"None have been fool enough to try lately," Morgan observed. "In the past, some made it and some didn't. There was a time when the Army had the Indians under control and then it was safe enough—if a mite dry. But with so few taking the Dante Cutoff, the Army's gone where there are more people to protect. That leaves the country pretty much to renegade Indians and trail robbers."

Kortner made a stubborn sound in his throat and walked away. Morgan finished drying his pipe, filled and lit it,

and smoked placidly as he watched the water chew away at the bank below him. He decided that tomorrow would be his last with these people; once the helper caught up, he'd have no obligation to stay.

His pipe finished, he rapped it out on his heel and swung around to leave. His shoulder struck against something soft. He heard a gasp of surprise and the sound of a body falling onto the muddy ground. Bending, he peered into the indignant face of Nora Fuller.

"Not again!" Morgan said.

"Do you find pleasure in knocking me down, Mr. Morgan?"

He held out a hand and she struck it aside. He said, "Don't be childish. You're sitting in cold mud. If you try to get up the way you did back in Burntgrass, you'll fall on your face."

Without waiting for her answer, Morgan caught her wrist and pulled her erect. He said, "And my name is Lowry. Morgan Lowry."

She freed herself and stepped aside, brushing a hand against the back of her skirt. "I'm filthy!" she said accusingly.

Morgan was momentarily furious—but the anger was more at himself than at her. She was no Indian to be able to sneak up on a man who had his wits about him. If he'd been alert, he'd have heard her even above the rush of the water. And he'd better stay alert, he reminded himself, or he wouldn't last to find Crane.

Looking at her again, the anger suddenly left and he wanted to laugh. Her indignant way somehow amused him. It showed just how young she really was. He said, "I'll see you to your wagon. You need dry clothes."

"I'll go when it suits me. I came here to look at the water. I intend to do so!"

Morgan shrugged. "Then I'll leave you to your pleasure. Good night."

He started away. "Wait!" she cried. "I—I won't be long."

Morgan swallowed a smile. "It's quite safe here, Miss Fuller," he said formally. "There'll be nothing prowling here after I've gone."

She said with soft desperation, "I—I came to talk to you.

And you know it." Her voice flared in the quickness of her anger. "You not only knock me down, you trample my pride. You leave me no place to hide—all I can do is admit that I came through the mud to talk to a man. Are you always so cruel?"

"I had no intention of being cruel," Morgan said quickly. "My apologies again." He felt the ground tremble slightly under his boot soles. "Move back. The river's beginning to chew at the bank."

She was a step in front and looking away from him. When he spoke, she stood stubbornly where she was, making no move. Then the ground beneath her feet jerked and began to slide forward. With a gasp, she tried to throw herself backward. An instant of emptiness, a feeling of failure, and a frightening rush of darkness gulped at her before Morgan's strong fingers gripped her arm and pulled her roughly to firmer ground. The force of his jerking lifted her from her feet and brought her hard against his side. She staggered and an arm went about her waist, holding her upright and, for an instant, tight to him.

Morgan could feel her muscles tense as she tried to work up another indignant outburst. He swung her lightly away and set her firmly on her feet. "This is treacherous country until you learn its ways," he said.

"Yes," she managed. "Thank you."

Morgan took her arm again and guided her a short distance to the left where a crumbling boulder provided her a place to sit. "If you're human, your legs will be shaking a bit," he said lightly. "Rest a moment." She sat gratefully, and he squatted beside her and lit his pipe again.

She smoothed her skirt over her thighs. He smoked quietly, waiting for her to say whatever she had come to say. But she only sat silently, her fingers lightly, nervously brushing at her skirt. Then she made a sudden move to get to her feet.

Morgan's words stopped her. "You had something in mind to talk to me about when you came here. I'm sorry I spoiled whatever it was."

"I don't find you easy to talk to, Mr.—Lowry. I have the feeling you're laughing at me."

"No," Morgan said quietly. "But I'm not used to young

ladies. I'm not very sure how their minds work, or what I'm supposed to do to make them feel easy around me."

"I see." She hesitated for some time. Then she spoke softly, almost awkwardly. "You'll be leaving us soon, I understand."

"When Kortner's helper arrives, yes. Then you'll have no need of me."

"And then what will you do?"

"Move on," Morgan said. "I haven't decided just where yet."

"Just—just drift?"

Her hunger for information was painfully obvious, even though he could not see why his movements should concern her. He finished his pipe and said, "One place is as good as another. Maybe I'll try my hand at mining again, or working stock."

"And without even knowing where you'll go or what you want to do, you're determined to leave?"

He said bluntly, "Why are *you* way out here?"

"My father wanted to go to California. There was nothing left for us back home."

"Home?"

"New York State. We had a farm. The war took my brothers. Mother died a little while after I was born. Father found it hard to raise a girl, especially when there were so many widows around itching to help him. When we heard of this train, we decided to join it."

"Pardee got it up?"

"Yes." She tossed her head, so that starlight caught in her hair and shimmered there as the strands strove to get loose. "Now you know all about me," she said.

"Hardly," Morgan murmured. "But then it doesn't matter. You have nothing to hide. You never have had, so you wouldn't know what it's like."

"You sound sure of yourself," she said shortly.

"You answered me easily enough," he pointed out. "That isn't the way you usually find people in this country. Here many folks have things to hide—that's why they've come. Whatever their reasons, they don't like being questioned. And it's come about that it isn't considered mannerly to question a man—or safe."

"Yet you questioned me."

"As you did me," he pointed out. "When you started, I judged you didn't really understand the ways of people out here. And when you answered my questions without taking any offense, I knew I was right. So I thought I'd best warn you."

"Thank you for the lesson in etiquette," she said stiffly.

Morgan chuckled and got to his feet. "It's a lucky thing you're a girl—and a pretty one. If you were a man, you'd most likely be shot before you got halfway to California." He put out a hand, helping her up. "It's time we got back and turned in."

VI

THEY CAMPED early the next night out, stopping in the lee of a cedar brake not too far from a thin trickle of creek. Morgan called Kortner's attention to the site when they were still a short distance away.

"I'd suggest camping there. Wood is scarce in this country. A cedar brake can make a fine windscreen sometimes."

Kortner peered up at the sun and frowned. "We'll lose a good hour of travel."

Morgan nodded agreement and then pointed to dust devils swirling off to the south, picking up dirt and small rocks and bits of brush as they danced hungrily over the flat countryside. "The air isn't very quiet in this country," he remarked. "It can blow you away while you're wondering why it hasn't."

Kortner was obviously thinking of their escape from the flood. "Maybe it'll be better," he temporized. "And it'll give Dowling a chance to catch up to us sooner."

Morgan repeated the name, his voice sounding stupid in his own ears. "Dowling?"

"Abel Dowling, the man I hired to help me. From the way he talked, he knows the country fairly well, and he's eager to go west."

"Most men you find in a place like Burntgrass are eager to head this way," Morgan agreed. He was probing for information and at the same time trying to keep the interest from his voice.

"Maybe *eager* wasn't the right word," Kortner said in an almost gossipy tone. "The way Dowling put it, he had to go a short way east on business. But then he said he felt quite certain he might well be heading west."

Morgan swore softly. "Quite certain he might head west! Do you mean that you left Burntgrass with this party and planning to take the Dante Cutoff with only a chance that a trained man might join you?"

"I asked Dowling to send a substitute should he return to Burntgrass and decide he wasn't coming west," Kortner said stiffly.

"I'll ride ahead and look for a good spot to camp," Morgan said abruptly, and sent his horse quickly away from Kortner.

Reaching the cedar brake, he located a fine, flat spot for the wagons to make their circle. An easy trail led through the cedars to the creek and there was fair grazing close by for the stock. Turning, he rode back toward the wagons. He was on the smoke again and enjoying the familiar feel of it under him. He could see Nora on the box of her wagon, reins held laxly, her body loose so that the constant jolting from the rough ground ran easily through her. She had learned a lot in the few days since they left Burntgrass, he thought.

Nodding to her but not speaking, he found Kortner and pointed out the place he had picked. Then he went to the rear of the wagon where his gear was stored, lifted it free, and put it on the back of the bay tied to the wagon's tailgate. He would have preferred to wait until late night to leave, but the feeling of sneaking away went against his grain. As it was, he tried to move off without fanfare.

He rode to the cedar brakes, followed the trail through them to the creek, crossed it, and then started on straight south. On the far side of the willows lining the creek banks, the country changed abruptly. Before it had been flat prairie; now it was broken, chopped up barranca and he had to move the horses carefully until he got back on some kind of trail.

He rode slowly for another reason as well. This was Comanche country. As close as he was to a trail and as well patrolled as the Army kept this area, a train was safe

enough. But a lone traveler could be an invitation to attack, especially one with two sound horses.

The sun began to slide close to the horizon. Locating a piece of high ground to his left, Morgan rode to it and looked back. He was still not far from the cedars, and the angle the chopped up nature of the country had forced him to take gave him a view of a bit of the wagon train. It was circled, settled in for the night now in the spot he had pointed out to Kortner.

Morgan moved his gaze eastward. He could see a rider some distance off in that direction. He was moving straight toward the camp at a fast clip. Then, suddenly, he veered his horse off the trail, angling southerly, and disappeared. Dowling, Morgan thought. But where could he have gone? Morgan cast his mind back, recalling finally a dip in the ground a good mile east of the cedar brakes.

The rider appeared again, well to the south of the trail and out of sight of anyone camped by the cedars. But now he was not alone; seven other riders trailed behind him. Morgan swore in surprise, and wondered if he had been right—if that was Dowling. He watched quietly as the eight rode in his general direction and stopped as if having a parley.

He shaped this in his mind, testing it against what he knew about Dowling. The man had always trailed him alone since their meeting in Santa Fe. Why then would he suddenly take on a small army of allies? Not because he was expecting to find Morgan and wanted help. No, Dowling would never share the pleasure of killing Morgan, no more than he would settle for the shot in the dark, the bullet in the back. When he next tried to kill Morgan, he would do it face to face—and alone.

Morgan felt a stir of unease run through him. What was it Kortner had said? "These people have money enough to hire a dozen guides."

If Kortner knew this, then others back in Burntgrass could have learned it too. They could even have learned it from Kortner. Morgan's lips pursed in a soft, wondering whistle. From Kortner? The man had an obvious ability to organize and apparently equally obvious greenness when it came to being a guide. Could he really be so raw to this

country that he didn't know enough to camp well above a river? That he didn't know the value of a stand of timber? Could any man who claimed to be a guide truly be so foolish? Morgan shook his head. And the question filled his mind: Just who was Kortner? Once again, Morgan's suspicions of the man flooded back.

Morgan answered his own question—Kortner was an organizer. He was a man who could organize a crew of trail robbers with virtually no effort. And he was a man who would either know or have a shrewd idea where the members of the wagon party kept their money.

Morgan frowned. But Kortner and Dowling? They made a too unlikely combination for him to swallow. Dowling was too much the loner to let even a man like Kortner organize him; and he was too open, too honest to lend himself to a renegade outfit. Even so, even if this made no sense, Morgan disliked the feel of it. He watched as the men clustered around Dowling began to break away, drifting off in a wide arc. If they kept along the same path, Morgan thought, they would reach the creek well downstream from where the wagon train was camped and also well out of sight of anyone who might be looking from the cedars in their direction.

Morgan stayed where he was until he was certain they were taking the route he had guessed. Then, quickly, he dropped from the mound and out of sight. Before he would be in a position for some of them to see him he rode forward, keeping high land between himself and the slowly moving strangers.

He needed an extra half hour of slow, careful riding, but finally he reached the creek and put its shield of willows between himself and the men he had seen parley with Dowling. It was almost dark now and when he crept forward and peered through the willows, he could barely make out the riders. They had separated but all still headed in the general direction of the creek. He looked in vain for the eighth man—the one he had assumed to be Dowling. There was no sign of him.

Morgan drew back from the willows, mounted the smoke, and started north. It was full dark now and he moved carefully, staying well back from the creek with its tangle of bushes. Finally he stopped. Directly to the east, across the

creek and through the natural lane between the cedars, he caught the twinkle of a campfire. A light breeze lifted a girl's laughter and carried it to him—Beth Tisdale from the pitch of her voice. Then he was sure when he caught the man-deep but still immature speech of Tim Boyle.

They were very close to Morgan's position, with little more than the narrow creek and the willow screen separating them. Beth laughed a second time and now Morgan could hear her words. "Tim, you do carry on so!"

"It isn't funny to me," he answered stiffly. "First you make eyes at Morgan and now at the new man."

"Mr. Dowling, you mean?" Her voice teased at him. "He is nice looking, isn't he?"

"He looks like a sharper to me," Tim growled.

Leaves and dry twigs crackled as someone ran. Tim called, "Beth! Beth, come back here." Then, finally, he said angrily, "All right, you critters get your water drunk."

Morgan smiled. He knew how the boy felt, left alone on the creek bank with nothing more comforting than some unfeeling stock. The smile changed to a chuckle as Tim's hesitant curses drove the stock out of the water and back on the trail to the camp. When the last of their sounds had faded, Morgan eased his two horses to the creek and let them water. Moving upstream a short distance, he washed his face and neck and drank deeply. He was drawing the horses back away from the creek when he heard the sounds of riders coming.

Quickly, he pulled the horses well upstream, tying them in a small clearing surrounded by willows. Working his way back carefully, he stopped a short distance from the place where he had drunk. Now he could hear voices, carefully low, but clear enough with the breeze easing their words to him.

"How long before the moon comes up?" The voice was nasal.

"Give or take a few minutes of two hours," a deeper voice answered. "We got plenty of time."

"Let's don't make no mistakes," a third speaker said nervously. "Sometimes greenhorns don't scare—and plenty of 'em's got pretty good shooting eyes."

The man with the deeper voice grunted in disgust. "When

a job's set up the way this one is, there can't be no mistakes. When the moon comes up, everything'll be ready. Now start getting your clothes changed."

Too curious to lie quietly and listen, Morgan wriggled carefully through the brush until he could make out the moving forms of five men. They were stripping off their trail dirty clothes as if readying for a swim. But once stripped, they made no move to go closer to the water. Instead they seemed to be dressing again. Morgan swore to himself. In this darkness he couldn't see enough. And from what the deep-voiced man had said, by the time the moon came up, it would be too late.

The sound of horses in the near distance reached Morgan's straining ears. In a moment, two other men appeared. The deep-voiced man swore at them. "Get them horses back away from here! And hurry up. The rest of us already got our costumes on."

The men led their horses away and then returned on foot. One of them mumbled something too low for Morgan to hear. A match flared as the man readied to light a cigarette. Morgan could see it dangling from his lips. The deep-voiced man swore again and slapped the match from the newcomer's hand.

"You want to let them at the camp know we're here, you crazy fool?"

Morgan grunted in sudden understanding. The flare of the match had shown him more than the dangling cigarette—it had shown him the bearded face of Forkness, the man who had been so busy challenging Kortner back in the Burntgrass saloon; and it showed him the breechclouts, leather leggings, and moccasins the five men were wearing.

VII

MORGAN WALKED his horses quietly upstream until he was far enough away to feel secure in fording the stream. He rode straight east and then made a wide swing back toward the camp. Leaving the horses in the dip where the rider had disappeared earlier, he went the last mile on foot. He stopped just beyond the edge of light cast by the lone campfire and studied the huddled circle of wagons.

One fire, he thought. Yesterday he would have cursed Kortner for such slipshod work—keeping up only a single fire and not posting enough guards; but tonight he thought he understood the reasons for many of Kortner's actions. There would be a lone guard somewhere, Morgan guessed, and it would be Kortner himself or Dowling—if the new-comer was Dowling.

Morgan flexed his fingers against the growing chill of the night. The positions of the stars told him that midnight was closing in. That meant the rising of the moon, and then the quick, deadly violence of the "Indian" attack. Straining his eyes toward the lane that ran through the cedars to the creek, Morgan looked for some sign of the raiders' movements. But the moon was still only a faint glow at the distant edge of the horizon, and there was too much darkness for his eyes to penetrate. Impatient, he eased forward, skirting the firelight, until he was close enough to Nora Fuller's wagon to dart into the deep shadows beneath it.

Now he could hear a rider on horseback. By the measured pace, Morgan judged this to be the guard. Carefully he moved into a position where he could see the man when he came closer. Then quick, sharp movement ahead caught his attention. He turned in time to see a dark form roll under the shelter of Pardee's wagon. Morgan felt the squeeze of sudden confusion as two things struck him at the same time—the realization that one of the trail robbers had managed to reach the camp and the kind of horse the approaching guard was riding.

Not bothering with the guard now, he flattened on the ground and sighted along it to the darkness beneath Pardee's wagon just ahead. He grunted when he saw a match flame up and then die out quickly. Then the shadowy mass of the raider moved, sliding out from under the wagon and disappearing back into the cedars. Now Morgan could make out the tiny spark of the fuse the man had lighted.

He rolled out from under Nora's wagon on the inside of the circle. A quick, soft spring carried him alongside Pardee's bigger vehicle. Dropping to the ground, he squirmed beneath it and stopped directly beneath the sputtering fuse. Drawing his knife, he cut the remaining length in two. Reaching up, he carefully drew free the two sticks of dyna-

mite that had been wedged up under a crossbrace beneath the wagon floor.

He lay wondering why only one man had come instead of all seven. The camp was asleep, all but the lone guard, and he was obviously part of the raiders. From his position, he couldn't have missed seeing the coming of the man who had planted the dynamite. Then the realization of the full plan shaped itself in Morgan's mind. He grunted softly in appreciation of its cleverness.

A straightforward raid always had a chance of failing—while one wagon was being attacked, the occupants of another just might come awake enough to fight back. But if that dynamite had gone off, things would have happened too fast for any of the wagon train to get organized quickly enough to be of much use.

He frowned at a sudden thought. When the dynamite failed to explode, the man who had planted it here would either come back or the entire gang would realize something had gone wrong and take the chance of a straightforward attack. Morgan moved, thinking to waken Pardee and warn him. He stopped as he heard the soft padding of the guard's horse. It was close now, abreast of the rear of Nora's wagon. Any noise Morgan made now would be enough to warn the man, perhaps to alert him to send a signal for the attack to begin.

Holding the dynamite, Morgan worked his way backward on his belly until he was even with the huge rear wheel of Pardee's wagon. Then, slowly, he eased himself into the position he wanted. Now he could see the feet of the horse. He brought his gun out of its holster, keeping the dynamite in his other hand. He stood up carefully, keeping himself in the shadow of the wheel. The breathing of the horse and the creak of saddle leather were loud in his ears now. He turned and saw that he had not deceived himself earlier. The horse was black with a prominent white blaze on its face.

He moved fully into the open. "Hello, Crane," he said softly.

The rider pulled up abruptly, his hand jerking the carbine that lay across his lap. The gun settled back as he saw starlight glinting off Morgan's forty-four.

Morgan shook his head. "Put your gun in its boot," he said in the same low tone. "There'll be no killing of innocent people here tonight."

"By God, Morgan Lowry!" The voice was a whisper. "They said you'd gone, but I should have known better." Crane Yancey leaned forward, and now Morgan could see how much of the boyishness had faded from his features, leaving them sharply, almost viciously, handsome in maturity.

"Kill me," he taunted. "Go ahead and shoot off the gun. Then see how many of these innocent people of yours live through what happens."

"I know all about your seven Indians," Morgan answered. He shook his head. "No, I won't shoot you. I'll do it the way you did it to my friends back at the mine—and the way you wrote your brother that I killed you." Abruptly, he thrust the two sticks of dynamite at Crane. "Here!"

Automatically a hand went out, pushing. Morgan dropped the dynamite and caught a hard wrist. He jerked savagely. Crane Yancey came out of the saddle, headfirst. Morgan drove his gun butt down through the protection of Crane's hat and against his skull. He caught the suddenly slack body and lowered it quietly to the ground. The whole action had taken only seconds and, as far as Morgan could tell, had aroused no one in the wagons.

Working quickly, Morgan used Crane's rope to lash him securely and the man's own kerchief to fashion a gag. Rolling Crane under Pardee's wagon, Morgan mounted the blaze-faced black and rode forward at a guard's slow, steady pace.

When he was on the far side of the circle, out of sight of anyone watching from the cedars, he stepped up the black's pace until he reached the Boyles' wagon. He pulled up and called out Tim's name softly. When he got no answer, he tried again, swearing at anyone who would sleep so soundly on the edge of Indian country.

Finally a sleep-tousled head poked out at him. "You?" he said stupidly.

Morgan's voice was sharp with impatience. "A bunch of trail robbers dressed like Indians are waiting in the cedars. They'll attack as soon as the moon's high enough. They've already got your guard. Now roust out the folks and warn

them. Get your guns ready. Tell them no lights and to stay quiet. Now be quick!"

He rode off, hurrying a little to make up the time he had lost talking to Tim. To the east, the moon was beginning its climb into the sky. Just ahead, the lone fire had burned down to little more than coals. Morgan rounded the end of the circle of wagons and started back along toward Nora's.

Morgan glanced toward the trees. Eyes accustomed to darkness saw a figure step into the open there and he lifted a hand in a gesture that said, "Stay back. Not yet!" The man blended back into shadow and Morgan rode on. Sounds came from both Nora and Pardee's wagons now. He glanced between the front of the one wagon and the rear of the other to see people huddled in the center circle, most of them no more than half dressed. They all stood quietly.

Then Kortner appeared. He stared around and his voice boomed out, "What's happening here? What's going on?"

Morgan reined the black and sent it into the circle. "They're coming from the trees," he said. "Find shelter you can shoot from. But hold your fire until I give the signal."

Kortner said in a thick, angry voice, "I'm the leader of this train, Lowry. What do you think—"

Morgan rode his horse up to the man. "Get a gun and fight like everyone else. And move fast!"

"You can't talk to me that way!"

"It was your bullhorn voice that warned the trail gang the people here are awake," Morgan snapped. He glanced around to see people moving into positions as he had told them.

He looked again at Kortner and added softly, "With all the shooting coming, if you took a bullet from the inside here, who'd know the difference? Who'd know it didn't come from out there?"

Kortner turned and hurried away. Morgan dropped from the black, drawing Crane Yancey's carbine from the boot as he did so. He knelt alongside Pardee and stared at the mounted men lined up in front of the trees. They blended well with the shadows and he wasn't sure that all the watchers could see them.

Then all seven broke forward, coming in a fast, wavy line. A cry of surprise broke from Betty Womack. Her hus-

band swore and brought up his gun. Morgan snapped. "Not yet, Billy!"

The raiders came at the same pace. Morgan could feel the impatience building around him. But he knew better than to let most of these people shoot at anything but a close-up target. The way they held their guns told him how little they knew about fighting.

Sam Tisdale broke first. Nerving himself with a growling sound that started deep in his throat, he fired. Morgan had no choice. He cried, "All right, now!"

Guns slammed against the night. A half naked rider lifted out of his saddle and sprawled to the ground. Flashes of flame came from the wavy line, still surging forward. Lead thudded angrily into the wagons, buzzed between them. Morgan shouted, "Again!" and a volley crashed from behind the wagons. A horse neighed as a bullet creased its hide. It bucked and its rider cascaded into the air and struck the ground. He rolled once and then lay still.

Morgan thought he could make out Forkness in the center of the line, and he drew a careful bead and fired. At the same instant, the man swerved, turning his horse back toward the trees, and Morgan's shot missed.

Forkness' deep voice cried out, "Head back! Something's gone wrong. Ride out!"

Now the men in the wagon train were firing and shouting at the same time as the five remaining riders and the empty horse raced for the protection of the cedars.

"Hold your fire!" Morgan called out sharply. "Bullets can't be bought over the next hill!"

The firing tapered off. The last raider was swallowed by the darkness. Two dark forms lay on the ground, two-thirds of the way between the trees and the wagons.

Morgan stood up. "Let's build a circle of fires outside and a big one inside. There'll be no more sleeping tonight."

"Indians. Real Indians!" one of the Zale twins said shrilly.

"No," Pardee corrected in his pedantic way. "Morgan said they were trail robbers dressed as Indians."

"Nonsense!" Kortner exclaimed. "Look at that man lying out there. Why, even from this distance you can see his war paint."

Morgan studied Kortner thoughtfully for a moment and

then turned to Pardee. "You and Tim cover me." Not waiting for agreement, he ducked under a wagon tongue and raced toward the man who had been thrown from his horse. He was breathing gustily, his eyes open and glinting with pain. Morgan lifted him as gently as he could, draped him over a shoulder, and started back for the wagons. He was almost to safety when a shot rang out from the cedars. It made an ugly sound as it thudded into the injured man's back. He cried out and his weight sagged heavily against Morgan. Two guns from the wagons answered the shot, the bullets whispering on either side of Morgan as he made the final distance into the circle.

Carrying the man to shadow, he laid him down and bent to hear his heart. Pardee came anxiously toward him. "Is he hurt badly?"

"He's dead," Morgan said. "They made sure of that." He motioned to Tim. "Bring a torch from the fire," he called.

When the light of the torch fell on the dead man, a small crowd had gathered around him and Morgan. "Take a good look," Morgan said.

Kortner looked, grunted, and turned away. Morgan said, "It's an old trick. The trail gangs know the Indians' whereabouts as a rule and they know where the Cavalry's patrolling too. That way, they can hit a wagon train and be pretty safe. By dressing like Indians and leaving a survivor to tell it was an Indian raid, they get away with a lot of killing and looting."

Two of the older women were making coffee, staying away from the group clustered around Morgan. He turned and noticed Nora looking gravely at him. She seemed about to speak, compressed her lips, and turned away.

From the other side of the circle, one of the Zale twins shouted, "I found Mr. Dowling! He's under Mr. Pardee's wagon, all tied up."

Morgan watched Kortner lead the way quickly toward Pardee's wagon. He wondered what would happen when Crane Yancey returned to consciousness.

VIII

CRANE YANCEY, or Crane Dowling as he called himself again, was laughing at Morgan. He squatted in the shadow of a wagon wheel and drank greedily of the hot coffee Mrs. Tisdale had brought him. The excitement of finding him and bringing him back to consciousness had died down, and most of the men were off on guard duty, patrolling in case of a return attack.

Morgan had taken a position where he could watch Crane and at the same time spot anyone who might come close. "Was it your idea or Kortner's to pass you off as your brother?"

Crane rolled a smoke with leisurely motions. "My name is Dowling if I want it to be. Kortner hired a Dowling and he got one."

Morgan shook his head. "Kortner talked to Abel in Burntgrass."

Crane chuckled softly in that way he had when he was caught out. "It could be that I came here and told Kortner Abel got took sick and sent me in his place."

It could be, Morgan agreed, but it wasn't very likely. He thought that it would be closer to the truth to guess that Forkness had overheard Kortner's deal with Abel, told Crane, and let Crane make the plans from that point. But if that was true . . .

Morgan said sharply, "You mean that Kortner isn't in on the deal with Forkness and you?"

Crane laughed. "That loudmouth? Not likely—unless his shooting off his mouth around Burntgrass makes him part of the deal. And it doesn't as far as we're concerned."

Morgan caught the "we." He said, "Forkness is an old hand at this kind of work, isn't he?"

"That's right. He knows his way around these parts pretty well."

"And just the kind you'd tie in with," Morgan said softly. He shook his head wonderingly. "You were making good money at the mine, but it wasn't enough. You had to have more. You're the kind who'll always have to have more—and do anything to get it."

Crane's sharply handsome features twisted into a mocking grin. "I wouldn't say that, Morgan. As soon as you kill Abel, I'm retiring. I'll inherit a good ranch. Abel's put a life of work into it. I should be nice and comfortable in my old age."

He glanced toward Nora standing by the fire. "And that's the kind of filly that just might be right to darn my socks and cook my grub for me."

From the edge in his voice, it was a good guess that Crane had sensed a bond between Nora and Morgan. "She has a mind of her own," Morgan said shortly. With a short chop of his hand, he wiped away the subject. "What's your plan, Crane, to stay with the wagon train until your friends can get another chance at the gold they think is here?"

"That they know is here," Crane corrected. "Loudmouth Kortner couldn't keep that information to himself." He added, "And you're right, I'm staying."

"What if I tell Pardee and the others who and what you really are?" He added, "That you were camped here waiting for just this party?"

Crane laughed. "You think they'd believe you? Not likely, not after I tell them how you helped your gang kill three miners and then how you tracked down the gang and killed them for their shares of the gold you stole, and finally how you hunted me and tried to kill me."

Morgan said, "What happens when Abel shows up? And he will sooner or later if he promised Kortner he'd join the train. What do you think he'll do when he finds out you're alive? That all these months he's spent tracking me, hungry to revenge the death of his kid brother, are all wasted time?"

Crane was still laughing at Morgan. "He hasn't managed to catch up with you yet, Morgan. But if he does this time, you'll have no place to run. You'll have to kill him to protect yourself. Because I won't be fool enough to let him know I'm alive, not when I can let you get rid of him for me."

Morgan said flatly, "Abel never harmed me. I've been running from him so I won't have to kill him. I'm not going to change now to oblige you—or for any other reason."

"Why, then I guess someone else will have to do it, and make it look like you did the job," Crane said softly. "With

five men left out in those cedars, I guess I can find one to do some killing."

Morgan shook his head. "You might try it, but it won't work. It might have a month ago, even a week ago. But he's gone hungry and come close to freezing and getting sunstroke and drying up from want of water, trying to keep on my trail. He's learned a lot. Besides, he'll have asked enough questions in Burntgrass to hear not only about me but about someone else—someone who sounds like it might be you. I don't say he'll believe you're alive, but he'll have his guard up. Just wondering will do that much. Abel may be a slow thinker, but he's not a fool."

"He's been fool enough not to be able to catch up to you."

"Because that's the way I wanted it," Morgan said softly. "I always saw to it that Abel would know which way I was headed. I figured that sooner or later you'd have to come to where I was—you can't afford to leave me alive. And I figured that when you did come, then Abel would find out the truth. Now that you're here, I'm not going to keep ahead of him. I'm going to let him catch up to me."

Crane laughed again, but a thinner sound this time. "You could be right, Morgan; Abel just might fool me. I'll keep that in mind."

Nora called from beside the fire, "There's hot food ready, Mr. Lowry."

Morgan walked to the fire and accepted a bowl of beans laced with venison. He hadn't eaten since noon dinner and the food felt warming and strengthening.

"You and Mr. Dowling seem to have a lot to talk about," Nora murmured.

Morgan smiled at her. "Why don't you just come out and ask your questions instead of hinting? You've already proved you're a curious woman."

She sucked in an indignant breath and then laughed ruefully. "I'm also an obvious woman apparently. All right, I got the impression you've known one another."

"We used to mine together in New Mexico," Morgan said shortly.

Pardee drifted up and Nora said, "Did you know that Mr. Lowry and Mr. Dowling used to mine together?" She seemed pleased by the knowledge.

Pardee shook his head and frowned. "I hope Dowling is a better hand with the stock than he was as a guard. Somehow I expected an older man from the way Kortner spoke."

Crane's remarks about Kortner had thrust aside Morgan's suspicions of the man, but now they flooded back in full force. Had Kortner originally hired Abel Dowling and then accepted Crane when Forkness showed him how that might gain him a share of the gold?

The Boyle baby had begun to cry fretfully and Nora moved toward it solicitously, leaving Morgan and Pardee standing alone. Morgan took a deep breath, readying himself to warn Pardee against Crane, but then he saw Crane's mocking smile and he clamped his lips shut. He would wait, Morgan decided, until he saw the pattern of Crane's thinking. Then would be time enough to warn Pardee. Meanwhile, he would concern himself with finding out the truth about Kortner.

"No one has yet thanked you for returning to help us," Pardee said in his grave way. "We're deeply grateful even though none of us understand why you chose to come back so providentially."

Untangling the spate of words, Morgan decided that Pardee was, in his own fashion, seeking information as Nora had been. A number of answers to the implied question came to his mind but he rejected them all. Instead, he said honestly, "I saw the trail robbers coming. I made a guess as to what they were after, followed them to the creek, and heard their plans."

"We hardly have possessions worth so much effort," Pardee said.

"That depends on what you mean by possessions," Morgan answered dryly. "The first part of their attack was to put a stick of dynamite under your wagon and blow it wide open. From their talk, I gather they figure you've got gold hidden there."

Pardee stared at him. "But how could they know?" he whispered. "How could anyone but those who entrusted their gold to me know? I assure you I've kept the fact that we have gold and its whereabouts a secret."

"More than likely it started as a rumor," Morgan said. "Or maybe it wasn't as secret as you thought. Someone could

have dropped a word in Burntgrass—not meaning to, of course. Or just the fact that you're headed for California to take up land could have made people think you had to have gold with you."

He wanted to ask if Kortner knew about the gold, but it was still too early to put suspicion of the man into Pardee's head. He could be wrong about Kortner, Morgan realized, so instead, he said to Pardee, "It's none of my affair, but how much gold do you carry? Enough to make killing all of you worthwhile?"

Pardee said with surprising insight, "I suppose a half eagle would be enough to make some people kill." He added, "As for what my wagon is carrying, I have the savings of the entire group. It was a mutual decision to pool it all so that we could hide it more easily. And there's an ample amount for each family to buy good land when we reach California and still have enough to sustain us until we establish ourselves."

Morgan smothered a grunt. "I can't advise you to put the gold someplace else—you'd just be endangering another person. But you might be wise to let each family have its own share."

"Then we'd lose the advantage of having it well hidden."

Morgan stared at him. "But it isn't hidden now. Don't forget that the trail gang knew which wagon to try to blow up. They weren't just guessing. They had advance information."

Pardee rubbed his chin with the edge of his hand. "Perhaps I should consult Mr. Kortner," he murmured. "He often has excellent ideas."

"You'd be better off consulting the owners of the gold," Morgan retorted bluntly. "Kortner has no stake in it, does he?"

Pardee shook his head. Morgan set down his empty bowl and drifted away to where Kortner stood guard behind a wagon wheel. As Morgan approached, Kortner turned his head.

"I'll relieve you if you want," Morgan offered.

"It's the kind of work that makes a man stiff," Kortner said. He straightened up. "So far I haven't seen anything.

Maybe they've gone." When Morgan snorted, he added, "Why did you come back?"

"I was on a hill to the south but near enough to see the man who calls himself Dowling meet with the trail gang. I figured something was up and I trailed the gang to the creek and listened in on them."

He was watching Kortner's expression carefully. The man's attempt to cover his dismay was painful to see. "What do you mean—the man who calls himself Dowling?"

Morgan said, "Let's be honest, Kortner. You know as well as I that the man over there isn't the one you first hired in Burntgrass. His name is Crane Yancey; he's only half a Dowling."

Shifting his weight, he added softly, "I'm wondering just how he made you let him join the train in place of his half brother Abel."

Even in the dim light from the distant fire, Kortner's face showed a sickly hue. "I had to let him join," he whispered. "He told me the gang was out there and what they were after. He said that if I didn't try to interfere with their getting the gold, he'd let me live. Otherwise I'd die along with everyone else. He—he lied. He told me there were twenty men, not just seven. I believed him. I knew that even if I warned the folks, we could never stand up against twenty experienced trail robbers."

"So you sold out thirteen lives in the hope of saving your own," Morgan said. Without waiting for an answer, he asked, "Did you mention me to Crane Yancey?"

"Why would I? He didn't ask and I didn't think of it."

"When you hired Abel Dowling back in Burntgrass, did he ask about me?"

"No. Why would he?"

Morgan said, "Because he's looking for me—to kill me."

Kortner stared at him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"So you'll know why I left the way I did. And so you'll know what might happen when he does show up—and he will. I always leave a trail for him. Sooner or later he finds it."

IX

THE WAGON TRAIN moved down into the barranca country and then over rolling hill land. Five days of slogging, up and down travel finally gave a glimpse of the viciously chopped up terrain that lay not far ahead. Everyone seemed to sense that they were nearing the point where they'd leave the comparative comfort of this road and start for the Dante Cutoff. Morgan could feel the nervousness building and even the younger ones were more willing to stick close to the wagons as they creaked along with aching slowness.

Morgan had insisted on a six man daytime and a four man night guard, this broken into two shifts. While the wagons moved, two men rode in front, two flanked the line, and two fought dust at the rear. At night, they rode in pairs, one couple going around the circle in one direction, the other moving the opposite way. Besides that, he had fires kept up each night—small ones because wood was beginning to grow scarcer.

Now and then Morgan would catch Kortner glancing back along the trail, and he knew that the man was looking for Abel Dowling to come into sight. And twice when Morgan was on night guard, he caught glimpses of Kortner going under the wagon where Crane bunked down, to remain there for some time.

What they talked about, Morgan couldn't even guess. But by now he was fully convinced that Kortner had told him the truth—he had no original connection with the trail gang. It must have been his boasting that had given Forkness the idea, and it was his obvious lack of knowledge of the country and his cowardice that had allowed Crane Yancey to take advantage and move in on the wagon train when he did.

Crane's attitude amused Morgan at first and then it began to annoy him. Crane spoke civilly enough when he was questioned about his knowing Morgan in New Mexico, but he carefully made no mention of the raid that had ended their mining days together. Morgan found nothing to object to in Crane's actions or his talk those first few days; then he began to shine up to Nora or to Beth Tisdale, whichever

was handier. Nora was old enough to take care of herself, Morgan decided, but Beth was something else again. She had given up on him, finding no response to her flirtatiousness, and so now she was obviously using Crane as a means to tease Tim. Seeing Tim's reactions to this and remembering his own youth, Morgan knew that sooner or later there would be trouble.

That trouble came suddenly the evening before the last day on the main road. They were in a stretch of flat, empty country with the only trees a small grove of scrub oak and the only water a half abandoned well so badly tainted with gyp water that not even the stock would mouth it more than once.

Morgan insisted they make camp by the oaks. Kortner objected. "I say we should go on until we find decent water."

"We have reserves enough," Morgan answered. "And there's a fair-sized stream we'll reach by tomorrow night. We're better off camped here in the open. Those barrancas up ahead make too good hiding places."

As often happened, Pardee arbitrated the dispute in his mild yet somehow firm fashion. "I think Morgan is right. I know I feel safer with open space around us at night."

Kortner turned away, not answering. Pardee sighed and went about his business. Morgan set himself to checking the camp arrangements. He had ridden drag all day and eaten his share of trail dust. He was glad when he could wash up in the gyp water, eat his evening meal, and roll into his blankets.

He thought of Abel Dowling, slogging doggedly along somewhere behind them, drawing closer with each passing day, determined to catch up because by now he must know the story that Morgan had spread before leaving Burntgrass. Morgan dropped into a doze, too light to let him sleep through the murmur of voices kept deliberately low. He lay with his face toward the inside of the circle and when he opened his eyes, he saw Nora carrying a few sticks of dead oak to the fire.

Morgan was puzzled. Nora was obviously alone but he could still hear the soft susurrus of whispered voices. Then he was fully enough awake to locate them behind him and he rolled over carefully, making no sound. Now he could

see the nearer outside fire, partially blocked from his view by two persons standing in the shadow by the rear wheel of the wagon.

Deliberately, Morgan rolled quietly free of his blanket and eased himself to where he could hear what was being said. He identified the voices as Crane Yancey's . . . and Beth Tisdale's! Morgan choked back a desire to swear. Didn't the little fool know that Tim was riding guard out there now? That there was a good chance he might see her with Crane? Or maybe that was what she wanted.

"I came, the way you asked." Her voice was a little breathless. And, Morgan noticed, it held just the tiniest tremor of doubt.

"I wanted to talk to you without having that fool kid butting in," Crane said. His voice was soft and smooth, almost a caress. "I think a lot about you—you're easy to think about and to look at. Tonight, when I'm riding guard, I'll have your voice in my mind too."

Morgan wondered if Beth Tisdale could handle a man as experienced as Crane Yancey. He thought perhaps he had given her too little credit when she said, "Is that why you spend so much time with Nora—so you can think of me?"

"You started playing up to me just to make Tim jealous," Crane countered. "Maybe I'm turning the trick on you."

When Beth answered, "Maybe I did start out for that reason, but it isn't why I came tonight," Morgan knew he had been right in the first place. She had too little guile in her to be a match for Crane, for any man of his experience.

"You came because you wanted to be with me—alone," he murmured. "Alone so we could talk without being bothered." It was a statement, not a question. He added, "Why don't you come right out and say how you feel about me?"

Without waiting for her to answer, he caught her arms and pulled her to him. Morgan saw Crane's mouth go demandingly down over Beth's lips. Beth hesitated, then abruptly pushed him away. "No, please! I'm frightened."

"Of me—or of yourself?" He was softly mocking.

"I—I don't know," she whispered. She made a move to turn and his hand reached out, catching her arm and holding her. "No," she said. "Let me go. I'm afraid my folks will miss me."

"If you really were afraid, you wouldn't have risked coming in the first place," he taunted. He drew her slowly back to him.

Morgan tensed, ready to roll into the open if it was necessary. But without warning, a form launched itself out of the dark, catching Crane and jerking him roughly away from Beth. In his surprise, Crane staggered into the opening between the rear of Pardee's wagon and the front of Nora's and stumbled backward until he was well into the circle. He went to one knee and then came slowly upright, his hand going for his gun.

He was outlined by the inside fire now, and Morgan, who had worked himself free of the wagon and into the circle, could see the familiar icy expression that meant Crane was ready to kill. Tim Boyle burst into the circle, his fists clenched. He seemed unaware of the gun Crane was ready to draw.

"You keep your hands off her, you hear!" he bellowed.

"It's the kid!" Crane said, and laughed. "I thought it was Morgan and it turns out to be a runny-nosed kid!"

Crane let his hand fall from his gun butt. "Be careful when you go pushing a man around, sonny. You could get shot that way. Now get back to your guarding. The lady's old enough not to need you for a wet nurse."

Tim made a wild sound and rushed at Crane. Morgan caught a glimpse of Beth standing by the inside of Nora's wagon, her hand pressed to her mouth, her eyes wide to reflect the terror that filled her.

It wouldn't be much of a fight, though. That was obvious from Tim's first rush. Crane stepped aside easily and lashed out a fist, almost gently. Tim jolted back and sat down, blood spurting from his nose. He wiped his sleeve across his face and got to his feet. Again he rushed, as blindly and awkwardly as a bull with six legs.

Pardee appeared beside Morgan. "What is happening? What—"

Morgan said, not taking his eyes from Tim or Crane, "Mr. Pardee, go out and tell the guards to keep a closer watch. There are only three of them now. This is the kind of chance the trail gang likes to make use of."

"But this—this fighting! Why?"

"Let it go," Morgan said. "It's been building for some time. I'll see that Tim doesn't get hurt too badly."

Nora appeared and called out, "Stop them! Why doesn't somebody stop them?"

Crane turned and saw her and smiled. Morgan saw him change, and he knew that Crane was going to show off his manhood for Nora Fuller. Instead of slapping Tim as the boy rushed in, he jolted him with a vicious blow to the mouth. For the second time Tim went to the ground on his back.

He rose slowly, shook himself, lowered his head, and charged again. He was strong, Morgan thought, and if he ever hit Crane with one of those wild fists, Crane would feel it. But he was also awkward and no match for a man who had won his share of saloon fights, who had the strength of maturity in his body, and who now was driven by a desire to show off before a woman. Crane's expression said that he was thoroughly enjoying himself. He was going to give Nora—and Beth too—a spectacle.

The next time Tim went down, he lay motionless for long seconds before he attempted to rise. Morgan slipped alongside Beth and said quietly, "You get back to your wagon and stay there." She made a soft moaning sound as Tim finally rose, staggered at Crane and was contemptuously knocked flat a fourth time. The blood was flowing from Tim's mouth and nose and one eye was puffing badly.

"Please do something," Beth whispered. "Crane will kill him."

"You should have thought of that before you tried to get Tim worked up to do this," Morgan said roughly. "Now get away from here!"

She moved away. Morgan walked into the center of the circle where Crane stood balanced on the balls of his feet, fists cocked while he waited for Tim to crawl out of the dirt again.

"That's enough," Morgan said. "You've had your fun and you've shown off enough for the lady. It's time to take over guard duty."

Crane turned to Morgan and the pleasure of the battle glistened like sweat on his chiseled features. His teeth shone in a smile of pure joy. "Are you bossing this outfit now,

Morgan? Do you want to try to make me take your orders?"

Tim said through swollen, cut lips, "Get away. This is my fight."

"You'll be lucky to find strength enough to crawl to your wagon," Morgan said, not looking at him. He kept his eyes on Crane. "I'm giving you ten seconds to get started for your horse. Then we'll settle who's giving the orders tonight. Any way you want—guns or fists."

Crane's smile slipped a little. "I know I can't outdraw you, Morgan. But I can whip you with my fists—and I will."

"Take off your gunbelt then," Morgan said. He unbuckled his and tossed it well away from him. Crane hesitated and then followed suit. Still smiling, he took a step toward Morgan.

X

CRANE YANCEY had everything he needed to win this fight, Morgan thought—the full strength of early maturity, quickness, and a mind as agile as his body. He was slimmer than Morgan through the body but equal in height, and he had longer arms so that Morgan had to knock his guard aside to reach him solidly.

When Crane came dancing in, his fists reached for Morgan's face—for his eyes and mouth—and Morgan knew that Crane was trying to mark him, so that Beth and Nora would be able to see who was the superior man. His expression said that he was going to chop Morgan into stewing meat before he put real power into his blows and battered Morgan to the dirt.

Morgan smiled. He let Crane flick out a fist and he moved his head aside just enough for Crane's knuckles to miss their mark. And now Crane made a counter move, stepping back and to the side in his dancer's fashion. Morgan feinted with a body movement, making Crane think he was moving in the same direction. Crane laughed and checked his motion. Then he brought himself around and forward, right arm cocked for a powerful upward slash that would use both Morgan's forward movement and his own to double its force.

But when his fist whipped out, Morgan wasn't there. He had followed his feint with a timed motion to the other side.

And now he came about to find Crane only half facing him, an open target. Morgan slammed a heavy fist into Crane's ribs, near the heart. He heard the gush of air leave Crane's lungs and he moved around and in front of the man. He put the heavy power of his solid shoulders behind his blows. With the same quick speed that made him deadly in a gunfight, he hit Crane three times in the body. Crane went off balance, trying desperately to backpedal until he could regain his breath. But some of the spring had left his legs and his movements were tinged with awkwardness now.

Morgan moved relentlessly forward and drove a fourth rock-hard fist under Crane's breastbone. Crane's mouth gaped open and his breath made a rushing sound as it scraped out of his throat. He lifted his hands, pawing at Morgan in an empty, futile gesture. Morgan hit him twice sharply over the heart and stepped back.

Crane had lost his smile and the glint of battle in his eyes had turned dull, like weathered metal. He turned slowly like an old man and made two staggering steps toward his gunbelt lying in the dirt. As he dropped to his knees, reaching, Morgan stepped forward and flicked the belt a few feet away with his boot toe. Crane crawled after it and fell, his face in the dust, his fingers scrabbling at the butt of his gun now less than a foot away.

Morgan bent and rolled Crane onto his back. He took the gun from its holster and emptied out the shells. Putting the gun back, he laid the belt in Crane's hand. "Go join your friends if you need nursing," he said softly. He turned to where Tim Boyle lay.

Now people began moving into the circle, Tim's mother and Beth coming the fastest. Morgan nodded to them. "He'll be all right. His pride's been bruised more than anything else." He signaled to Pardee, Kortner, and Billy Womack. "We're due for guard duty," he reminded them, and went to get his horse.

Nora had disappeared and Morgan assumed she had gone into her wagon in preference to watching the fight. But when he reached his horse, he found her sitting her own small sorrel mare, waiting for him.

She said, "Mr. Pardee hasn't felt too well today. I can ride in Mr. Yancey's place and let him rest."

Morgan checked his cinch and mounted the smoke. "I'll go tell Pardee and then bring some wood to the fires. You'd best wait here until they're built up some."

"Do you think I'm afraid of the dark?"

Morgan laughed at her. "I don't think you know enough about this country yet to be afraid of anything in it."

She said surprisingly, "That's not quite true. I'm afraid of Crane Yancey—especially now."

"You needn't be," Morgan said. "He won't be with us long." He paused and lifted an arm to point at a shadowy figure moving away from the camp. "He's riding off now. He wouldn't stay here after what happened to him."

"He hates you, though," she said flatly. "And he's afraid of you. I've noticed it since you've been here together."

She was as perceptive as she was curious, Morgan thought. And he wasn't surprised when she said, "He'll kill you if he gets a chance. It's in his eyes."

"I know," Morgan said. "But he's waiting for the right time—so he can blame it on someone else, or make someone else do it for him."

"He may be out there now, ready to shoot you when you go on patrol."

"No," Morgan said. "He's hurt too badly. He'll go to his friends and heal up before he tackles me again."

"His friends?" The voice was Pardee's. He had come up on foot, his steps soft in the dust.

"Crane's head of the trail gang," Morgan explained briefly. "He bluffed his way in here by telling Kortner he was taking the place of Abel Dowling, who couldn't come."

"You knew this?"

"I knew," Morgan admitted. "But by keeping quiet, I could hold him under control better." He looked toward the darkness. "Now we've lost that advantage, little as it was."

"And this Abel Dowling?"

Morgan smiled in the dimness. "He'll be along. You can count on that." He brushed the subject aside with a wave of his hand. "But those men out there have ridden overlong. Pardee, Nora's going to take Crane's place for tonight so you can go back to bed."

Wearily, Morgan began his own rounds. The night moved on slowly and quietly. With daylight, he went back inside

the circle. The women had breakfast cooking, and Morgan ate quickly. Then at Pardee's insistence, he went inside the man's wagon for a few hours of sleep while the morning was still cool.

By noon dinner Morgan was up and rested. The wagons' stopping had brought him to his feet, and when he stepped into the bright, hard sunlight he found they had come to the junction with the Dante Cutoff. Pardee was on his wagon box, looking dubiously at the obviously little used track that rose and fell with the land, now showing on a hill-slope, now disappearing into a barranca. In the far distance there was a dim line, hinting at trees along a watercourse. The main trail stretched on westward, more appealing in that it was clearly frequently traveled.

Kortner was on a horse close to Pardee. "There it is, the trail that's going to save us precious weeks." His voice boomed out, obviously for the benefit of everyone.

Pardee said dubiously, "It doesn't seem to have been much used lately."

"Not by anyone," Kortner boomed. "Including renegades." He turned in the saddle. "Let's grab a quick meal this noon so we can make it to water tonight."

Pardee said no more and Kortner moved off, sitting importantly in the saddle. Morgan waited until food had been dished up and then he went to where Kortner stood in the shade of a wagon. "What are you going to do when you get to the forks?"

"Keep to the right. The map shows it'll save us a good two days, and maybe more than if we take the other fork."

"The map doesn't show what kind of country that piece of trail goes through," Morgan told him. "The left fork isn't much, but it has more water, more timber, and now and then a little game. It's more open country, too, and that means less chance of a sneak attack."

"We've been over this before" Kortner said in his stiffest voice. "I was hired to save these people time and distance. I'm doing so. I read all the books. I know what lies ahead. We'll just take on extra wood and water before we start down the right fork. Besides, with the guard we have, there isn't much chance anyone will risk an attack."

"Let me give you one more warning," Morgan said quietly.

"We'll be going along the edge of dune country—steep rolling sand hills as far as you can see. It's beautiful—and dangerous. If a southwest wind comes up, they'll drift and blow and you'll be wishing you were caught in a blizzard instead. Just remember, if wind comes, we'll have to find shelter and hole up until it's over."

"We'll be miles to the east of them," Kortner said.

"Not so many miles that blowing sand can't reach us," Morgan answered.

"I sometimes wonder how you ever got anything done in your life," Kortner said with heavy contempt. "Everything you think about seems to have more bad than good and not worth the risk."

"I'll risk myself. I don't like risking others," Morgan said. He walked away to clean his plate and ready his horse for the day's work.

He rode flank that afternoon, choosing the west side of the slow moving wagon train because from that position he could look over the chopped up country more easily. Crane and his crew would still be alongside them somewhere out there, he knew. And especially now Crane would be eager for the chance to attack—to even the score with Morgan as well as get the gold from Pardee's wagon.

The first part of the trail was rough but not too difficult, and they reached the line of trees and the thin watercourse before dusk had begun to set in. They were down in a canyon bottom and Morgan suggested that a man stand guard on the rimrock at each side. Tim Boyle, who had kept to his wagon throughout the day, volunteered to take the south side. Billy Womack rode back up to the north crest over which they had just come.

Billy hadn't been at his post long when he shouted and waved his hat. Morgan climbed aboard the smoke and rode quickly to him. Billy pointed down the trail stretching to the north. "Rider coming."

It had begun to grow dim but Morgan could see a lone figure on horseback plodding steadily toward them. He reached the top of a rise and then dipped down out of sight. When he next appeared, he was close enough for Morgan to recognize his solid body and the way he sat his horse. It

was Abel Dowling, and he would reach the camp within a quarter of an hour.

"It's the man Kortner hired back in Burntgrass," Morgan told Billy.

He turned to look across the canyon as Tim Boyle shouted. Morgan put heels to the smoke, sending it down into the canyon and up the other side. Some of the men were mounting horses, preparing to follow.

Morgan pulled alongside Tim, his carbine held at the ready. He let the muzzle drop as he saw a single rider coming straight toward them. It was Crane Yancey and he sat his horse with both hands held high to show that he had no hunger for a fight.

Morgan disliked the feel of this—Abel Dowling coming from one direction and Crane from the other. But he had no choice except to sit and wait.

XI

"WHAT DOES Crane think he's doing, coming back like this?" Tim Boyle demanded. "He's crazy!"

"No," Morgan said. "Crane always has a reason for whatever he does."

Seeing Tim's restless indecision, Morgan reached out a hand and pushed down the muzzle of the boy's carbine. "You put that away before you have an accident with it. I'll take care of this."

Tim seemed about to protest and then he reluctantly slipped his gun into the saddle boot. "If he's tricked us . . ."

"He could have shot you before now if he'd wanted to," Morgan pointed out roughly. "He could have sneaked into gun range before you so much as caught a smell of him. Now be quiet and let me do the talking. Or better yet, ride back to camp."

Once more Tim hesitated and then, angrily jerking his horse's head around, he went down the hill, leaving Morgan to wait alone for Crane Yancey.

As soon as Tim disappeared, Crane put heels to his horse and brought him quickly up to Morgan. He still held his hands extended and empty. Morgan said bluntly, "What the devil do you want?"

"Maybe I got lonesome out there," Crane said in his mocking way.

"You'll find no welcome here. The folks know about you and the trail gang." Morgan jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "And now Abel's coming."

Crane just grinned at him, and Morgan knew now that this was why Crane had decided to risk coming back. He had seen Abel Dowling making his way here. That meant he had some plan for involving Abel and Morgan so they'd get rid of one another.

Morgan shook his head. "Whatever you're planning, it won't work. Just turn and ride back the way you came. And don't try this again. Every man on this train is primed to shoot you on sight."

Crane shrugged. "Whose life are you trying to save, Morgan—your own?"

"Mine and a lot of other people's."

"You'll lose," Crane said softly. "All the way around, you'll lose." With a jerk, he reined his horse around and sent it racing back the way he had come. Morgan remained where he was until Crane was out of sight. Then he signaled down to the camp. Tim rode up again and Morgan said, "He's gone. But that doesn't mean he'll stay away. Don't take any chances. If you hear a strange noise, see a strange movement—call out."

Questioning his own judgment both in the way he had handled Crane and in letting Tim stand guard up here, Morgan made his way down the slope to camp. He moved slowly, reluctant to face Abel Dowling. But it was that or do as Crane had done and ride off.

The idea was a tempting one, and it would solve a lot of his problems, Morgan thought. But as usual he seemed to have inherited other people's problems. He knew himself too well to think that he could turn his back on these folks now.

Sam Tisdale met him as he reached the edge of the wagon circle. "Tim said that was Crane up there with you."

"That's right," Morgan said. "I sent him packing."

"So he could lead the trail gang against us? Why didn't you kill him?"

"He wasn't holding a gun," Morgan said simply. With a

nod, he rode on. He could see most of the people grouped around the fire, waiting for the food to be dished up. Their interest at the moment was obviously centered a few feet to one side where Pardee and Kortner stood with chunky, heavy-bodied Abel Dowling. Morgan took his time about unsaddling the smoke and putting it in the rope corral and then stowing his gear in the rear of Pardee's wagon. By then food had been handed out and Dowling was off to one side, eating alone with Kortner. Pushing his gun down into his holster, Morgan walked deliberately up to them.

Abel Dowling stared woodenly at him. From his lack of movement, it was clear that he'd known Morgan was here and that he had prepared himself for this meeting.

"I just ran Crane off, Abel. He rode with us for a while, filling in for you—he claimed."

"That's a lie!" Abel Dowling said in his heavy voice. "Crane is dead. You killed him."

"We've been over this before," Morgan said tiredly. "Kortner, tell him about Crane Dowling."

"I did," Kortner said. "I explained it to Mr. Dowling here, but . . ."

"Did you describe him?" Morgan asked softly.

"Damn you!" Abel Dowling cried at Morgan. "I know what you're trying to do. But it won't help you, Lowry. I trailed you until I caught you. And nothing you can say is going to do you any good."

Morgan forced his voice to remain low and level. "Don't get any ideas about a gunfight now, Abel. We're in hostile country here—Indians and trail robbers may both be close. We need all the men we can get."

"I can wait," Abel Dowling said heavily. He turned and walked away to stand by himself in darkness.

Kortner said, "What are you going to do now?"

"Stay," Morgan said briefly. He paused and added, "Abel won't do anything to me as long as we're in this country. If he hired out to help you, he'll fill his contract." He left, suddenly hungry at the realization that his confrontation with Abel Dowling had ended. It had gone easier than he'd hoped. Not that it was ended, he knew. But he was sure enough of Dowling to feel that the man would do just as

he'd told Kortner—honor his contract first and bide his time where Morgan was concerned.

He managed to eat and get off by himself without having to answer any more questions. But he could tell from the wondering glances that the people were curious—about his relationship with Abel Dowling and about his meeting with Crane. And tomorrow he would get the questions he had managed to avoid tonight. Especially, he thought with thin humor, from Nora.

The next day Abel Dowling fit himself easily into the pattern of the train. He held himself pretty much away from the people, Morgan noticed; with the exception of Kortner and, now and then, Pardee, he spoke only when spoken to, and then abruptly. Consequently, Morgan was surprised when Dowling rode up to him in mid-afternoon and paced his black horse alongside the smoke.

"That man Kortner is a fool," Dowling said abruptly. "Whatever made him choose this trail?" He glanced back at the lead wagon jouncing over the rutted excuse for a road. "And then to take this fork . . ."

"He talked himself into the job by promising to save the people time getting to California," Morgan answered. "He's trying to live up to the promise." He glanced curiously at Dowling, knowing that he hadn't come to talk about Kortner.

"The country was empty when I came through here," Dowling said. "But from talk I heard, there's always the chance of Indians. And then if it's true about these trail robbers . . ."

"It's true. They attacked us back on the main road," Morgan said. "And they haven't left, not with thinking of the gold Pardee is carrying."

He could see that Dowling was uneasy, embarrassed probably, at having approached him. But whatever lay on the man's mind was strong enough to force him to stay until he got it said.

Morgan looked straight ahead. "Get it off your chest, Abel."

He had never called the man by his first name until last night, but Dowling took no more notice now than he had then. He said slowly, heavily, "We might be lucky and get

through with no more than a big thirst. But more likely, there'll be trouble."

Morgan nodded. "They'll hit us while we're slogging tired horses up the hillside or—if we get as far as the spring—while we're busy watering." He thought about it. "It's a fair bet that the trail gang is camped at the spring right now."

"My guess," Dowling said. He hesitated and added finally, "I came to agree to call it quits until we're out of trouble country."

"We'll know we're safe when we can taste the Pecos," Morgan said. "And I figure it's our job to see that everybody in this party gets a chance to do just that."

"It'll help all around if you keep Crane's name out of your mouth," Dowling said. He cantered his horse back to his flank position.

Morgan was tempted to call after him, "Fair enough—as long as Crane doesn't come to give us trouble," but he swallowed the words. He dropped Abel Dowling from his mind for the moment and studied the land ahead. The hills were growing sharper, and the steepness of the trail as it climbed them showed clearly. Tight switchbacks and rough country above and below them made a fine place for an attack, Morgan thought.

From here he could see to the west and make out the way the deep barrancas ran. Two of them ran from the foot of the hills to join some distance away. A third lay some distance this side of the others, connected to them by a narrow gully. From there on west, the land flattened out and disappeared into the endless sweep of sand dunes that Morgan knew lay off that way just beyond his sight. He knew, too, that the flatness seen from here was deceptive. It was actually cut by narrow, high-walled barrancas, some of them running right to the dunes before they stopped. He knew because he recalled only too vividly slogging along the rocky bottom of one, the smoke staggering after him.

He studied the land for some time and then turned and rode back to where Pardee sat on the box of the lead wagon. Kortner rode alongside him, still obviously not too comfortable in the saddle.

Pardee smiled at Morgan. "Mr. Kortner tells me that

there's a spring on the far side of those hills. It should be a good place to make camp."

"It was the place I had in mind earlier," Morgan admitted. "But I think now it'd be a mistake to go that far."

Kortner scowled. "What's scaring you this time?"

"Me and Abel Dowling both," Morgan said pleasantly. "And that hill is. When we start pulling it with tired horses, we'll be easy targets. There isn't room on the trail to put guards out except in front and back, and there's good land for Indians or trail robbers to hide all along there."

"And if there isn't anyone?" Kortner asked.

Pardee said in his thoughtful, formal fashion, "I know little of these matters, but I can see the danger in trying to climb the hills with tired stock. On the other hand, the thought of the water is tempting."

"Not so tempting when you think how good a trap that spring can be," Morgan answered. "It's the last water between here and the Pecos. That's a long pull, and all travelers who come this way fill up at the spring. The Indians learned this a long time ago and got their share of scalps."

"If they're waiting for us at the spring now, they'll still be waiting in the middle of the night," Kortner said in his angry way. "So what difference does it make when we get there?"

Morgan said patiently, "If we camp on that flat at the foot of the hills tonight, we can scout out the spring ahead of time." He pointed. "There's a barranca that starts just to the west of the flat. A pair of us can slip down there after dark, circle around and explore the country. If it's safe, then we can break camp at midnight."

"And if a trap has been set for us at the spring?" Pardee questioned.

"There's a way around," Morgan said reluctantly. "It's dangerous—rough and dry country—but it's safer than for this party to try to fight an ambush—Indian or trail robbers."

"I tend to agree with Morgan," Pardee said to Kortner. "As he points out, we can't lose more than a few hours—and we might be saving all our lives."

XII

THEY MADE CAMP near the north side of the flat so that the foot of the hill was close to half a mile south. Except for the barranca that sloped abruptly down a short distance to the west, there was no place for a raiding party to hide.

Morgan and Dowling busied themselves checking the hooves of the stock. They worked together well enough but without speaking. Apparently, Morgan thought, Dowling had talked himself out earlier that afternoon. Finished with his part of the work, Morgan went to where Kortner was tacking a loose flap of canvas to the frame of his wagon.

"What do you think of changing our guard pattern to-night?"

Kortner gave a hard blow with his hammer. "What difference does it make what I think? You and Dowling seem to be guiding this train now."

Morgan said patiently, "Crane will be back with his friends by now. If he's planning an attack, he'll take advantage of what he knows about our guarding pattern."

"First you had Yancey ambushing us on the hill and then at the spring. Now he's going to attack the camp."

"He may try all three," Morgan said dryly. "Don't forget how hungry he is for that gold." He paused and added slowly, "And don't think that he's going to keep his word about letting you live if he manages to get this train. He got all he needed from you when he was here."

Kortner's expression said that he hadn't thought that far ahead. He swallowed and wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "What kind of guard do you want to set?" he asked in a surly tone.

"We'll set one big fire toward the hill to the south and we'll put a couple of men out there to ride back and forth in front of it in such a way that it'll look as if we have a heavy guard posted in that direction. A small fire to the north, the campfire inside the circle, and a sharp-eyed man watching the mouth of the barranca should do the rest. It's the barranca we have to watch, but we don't want them to know we're aware of it."

He walked away to find Abel Dowling. "We can leave as soon as it's full dark," Morgan told him.

By now it was suppertime and Morgan went to the fire for his bowl of beans laced with shreds of beef. He took it and a mug of coffee away from the warmth of the fire and squatted down. To his surprise, Dowling joined him for the second time that day.

Dowling said, "We're going to be out in the dark alone—and maybe a long way from anybody. One of us could easy enough kill the other and blame it on this trail gang or on Indians."

"So we could," Morgan agreed.

"Now," Dowling said slowly, carefully, "from the way Pardee and Kortner keep talking about the man who called himself Crane Dowling, it could be my brother. But until I see him, I ain't going to believe it. I've had too long thinking he's dead."

"I thought we weren't going to talk about it," Morgan said.

"It's heavy on my mind," Dowling answered. He waved his spoon. "But in the long run it don't matter if Crane's dead or alive. Not to you, it don't."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"If Crane is alive, when I catch him, I'll kill him. And then I'll get back to the job of killing you."

"That's crazy talk," Morgan said. "The only reason you want me dead is because you think I killed Crane. If you learn I didn't, why should you keep on?"

"You came to my ranch to kill him," Dowling said flatly. "You tried to kill him. You admitted that much. Maybe you failed and maybe you didn't. What matters is, you tried. I been thinking about that today. And the way I see it, if Crane is still alive and with this trail gang, it was your chasing him that drove him to live like that."

Morgan chewed and swallowed a mouthful of food. "I hope you learn the truth before you do something you'll never be able to get off your mind," he said. "Now let's get to-night set—or neither one of us will be around to worry about killing."

Dowling gulped coffee and nodded. "I don't know the

barrancas here. You do from the way you talked. So you lead."

They left it at that and finished their food in silence. Then they could only wait impatiently for the night. When the darkness did come, it was all Morgan could ask for—thick and clouded, with not even the light of the stars to reveal them. At the same time the smell of this night worried him. It held a heaviness and a stillness that made him feel a storm might well be working its way up from the south. That could mean heavy rain to turn the clay surface of the trail into impassability or it could mean rainless high winds to blow up a blizzard of sand from the dunes to the west.

Morgan said to Pardee as he stood by the little bay he had chosen for that night's work, "Give us a full five minutes before you build up the fires. We'll be down in the barranca by then. After that, you know what to do."

"We know," Pardee agreed.

"If you hear any shooting, expect trouble."

"I pray there won't be any," Pardee said formally. He looked thoughtfully at Morgan. "Why do you feel obliged to do this? You and Mr. Dowling know this country. You could both leave us and make your way to safety. We mean nothing to you. Yet you're risking yourselves for our safety."

"Some men can cut themselves off from the rest of the world and live alone," Morgan said slowly. "But I figure I'm still a member of the human race. That gives me some rights and it gives me some obligations too. There may be parts of the world where a man can get the first without paying, but not in this country."

He turned away and joined Dowling, who was aboard a black horse. They melted into the darkness, slowly so as not to make the hoof sounds of the horses too loud on the still, heavy air. Morgan had scouted out the mouth of the barranca earlier and now he led them on a line to it. When the bay hesitated Morgan left the saddle and felt forward with his foot. The barranca began here, dropping off sharply the first few feet and then sloping more gently to the bottom.

"We lead them in," he whispered to Dowling, moving alongside the black.

Dowling dismounted. Carefully, Morgan started the descent. The ground was fairly solid here and the loudest

sounds came from the crackle of dry brush pressed down under the weight of the horses. Once on the rock-strewn bottom, Morgan mounted again. "If we keep to the wide barranca, we'll run straight to the sand dunes," he said softly. "But there's a narrow gulch that takes off south about a quarter of a mile along. It isn't much for horses as I recall but it'll lead us into the big barrancas that run along the foot of the hills. Then we'll be close to the best place for an ambush—and that's where I figure to find the trail gang."

He started the bay forward, not urging it but letting it pick its way through the heavy darkness. This barranca, he remembered, had more than once been used in earlier times by large parties seeking to escape Indian ambush. As a result, there were still deep ruts wandering between the large boulders that littered the bottom. Now and then the bay would stumble into one of those ruts but most of the time it moved along well enough. The black stayed so close that Morgan could now and then feel its breath against him.

As his eyes grew accustomed to this kind of darkness, he began to make out vague shapes—and finally the dark hole that marked the offshoot gully.

"Left," Morgan murmured softly, and reined the bay in that direction. This was suddenly a different kind of footing. The narrow sides of this canyon had held their share of roaring flash floods over the years and they had become steep, in some places dangerously undercut. And they had dumped their mixtures of roots and rock on the ground to the point where Morgan finally had to leave the bay and go ahead on foot.

In the far distance, light showed briefly against the southern sky. "Storm," Dowling said worriedly.

"Heat lightning so far," Morgan answered.

They went on, beginning to sweat now as the heat grew more oppressive. Another flash of lightning showed Morgan the mouth of a wide barranca not far ahead. He slid down the three foot drop leading to its bottom and stepped aside while Dowling joined him.

"Tie down anything that might rattle," he whispered. "The hills rise on the far side of this barranca." A breath

of heavy air moved past them, coming from the northwest. Morgan sniffed it.

"Horses up ahead," he murmured.

Dowling touched his arm. "Harness rattling. Not a hundred feet away, I'd judge."

Morgan nodded and started forward. The bottom of this barranca was sandy and they moved silently and quickly. A sharp bend came with startling abruptness and as they rounded it, voices could be heard less than twenty feet on. Both men stopped.

"What's it look like on the flat?" a voice demanded. Morgan thought it was Forkness speaking.

"They got half the camp turned out riding guard." The answer came from well above the barranca; a man was stationed on the hillslope where he could look down on the wagon train.

"I say sneak up and put a few lit arrows into the wagon sides," the first voice answered. "Once the wagons start burning, they'll all run around like a bunch of chickens and we can shoot 'em easy."

The voice from the hillslope said, "Crane said earlier we was to wait until tomorrow and catch 'em pulling the hill."

"Crane Yancey ain't running this show no more than me," the first man said, and now Morgan knew it was Forkness.

Beside Morgan, Abel Dowling stiffened and made a choking sound deep in his throat. Morgan gripped his arm quickly. He could feel Dowling's muscles quiver and he dug his fingers in more tightly. After a moment Dowling got control of himself and stopped shaking.

The sound of a horse coming at a fair pace along the hill trail echoed down into the barranca. The man on the slope called, "Someone coming."

"You think I'm deaf? Get your gun ready."

The sound of hoofbeats stopped. A voice called softly, "Forkness? Calder?"

"It's Crane," Forkness said.

"Over here," Forkness called out. Then he said, "I say we hit that train tonight. They got half the camp out riding guard and just waiting to be picked off."

"That's just more of Morgan's trickery," Crane answered. "He's made you think the men are all outside, but you take

a shot at one and you'll find most of them are someplace else—waiting for your gun flash so they can do the picking off."

He paused and added, "We'll hit tonight but not the way Morgan or Abel would expect. We're going to go over the hills east of the trail, circle around and come up to the camp from that side. We'll have to be on foot. It's too rough to ride. But that's just why they won't be expecting us from that direction."

"You make it sound like Calder and me ain't getting in on the fun," Forkness said challengingly.

"That's right," Crane answered. "I've got a job for you right here. I know Morgan and he's just liable to pack that train up and put it on the trail now that it's dark—figuring to fool us. If that happens while me and the boys are circling around to the east, we'd be caught too far away to make our hit. But with you and Calder here, you could hold them at the bottom of the hill with a few shots and give us time to work back."

Forkness grunted assent. Crane said, "As soon as we hit the train, you and Calder ride up. We're taking the gold and heading north fast and hard, and we're not stopping until the horses wear out."

"Only the gold?" Forkness cried angrily. "Them teams and that furniture and all that food is just waiting to be took. We can sell most of it for plenty. . . ."

"My life is worth more than a few dollars," Crane snapped. "Randall was out hunting just before dark and he spotted a camp of Comanches about an hour to the south. They'll be on the move again by daylight. So if we don't get the wagon train tonight, they'll get it tomorrow. And if we try to take the whole outfit north, they'll catch up to us. You want to fight Comanches, you just help yourself. Me, I'm taking my share of the gold and riding."

XIII

MORGAN TOUCHED Dowling's arm lightly, drawing him back until they reached the point where the gully broke into the barranca. There, Dowling said in a sick voice, "That was Crane. That was my brother."

"There's no time to think about it now," Morgan said urgently. "It'll be daylight in less than five hours and it won't take this gang more than three to make their swing east and attack. We've got to have the train away from here before then."

"The devil with the train," Dowling said with surprising force. "You do what you want with it. I'm going back there and kill Crane."

"You'll get plenty of chances at him later."

"No," said Dowling stubbornly. "I've got to do it now."

Morgan drew his gun softly. "I can't risk it—losing you now or letting that crew know we've been spying on them." His voice was quietly apologetic. He lifted the gun and drove the barrel down, hard enough to send Dowling to his knees but not hard enough to knock him out. Moving quickly, Morgan tied Dowling's hands with his own kerchief, drew Dowling's gun and slipped it into his own belt, and then pulled Dowling to his feet.

Dowling stumbled forward, breathing thickly but not speaking. The flashes of lightning were more frequent now and closer. But Morgan could still hear no thunder and he refused to let the chance of a storm concern him at the moment. In a way, he was grateful to the lightning. It let him find the way back to their horses much faster than they had been able to go before.

Even so, twice he had to pick up Dowling, and once he fell and bruised a shoulder. But finally they could hear the soft, worried whinny from one of the horses, and soon Morgan was helping Dowling into the saddle.

Dowling spoke for the first time. "You've gone crazy, Morgan. What good is getting the train out of here going to do? Where do you take it—over the hill where Forkness is waiting? And if we get past him, what about the Comanches?"

"There's only one way left to go," Morgan said. "And I'll need your help just to get us started."

"It's too late for me to go after Crane now anyway," Dowling said dully. "He'll be swinging well east by this time." He seemed to hold no grudge against Morgan for what he'd done.

"That's better," Morgan said, and released Dowling's hands. They rode as quickly as the terrain allowed. Just short of

the camp end of the big barranca, Morgan paused and called softly, "Tim."

Silence. Morgan raised his voice a little. "Tim. It's Lowry and Dowling."

"Come in sight with your hands up," Tim Boyle called back.

Morgan grunted and sent the little bay surging up the slope, heeling it so that it spurted the last few feet of steep pitch. He reined aside and sat, his hands held high. Dowling appeared in a moment, following the same pattern.

"All right," Tim said. "I had to be sure."

"Fair enough," Morgan admitted. "All right, get back to camp."

They rode to camp together. Morgan called in the guards and asked Pardee to bring everyone to the fire in the middle of the circle. When they were all assembled, Morgan said flatly, "The trail gang is coming at us from the east. They'll be here in a couple of hours."

Tim Boyle patted his carbine. "And we'll be waiting for them."

"No," Morgan said. "In the first place, the country on that side is too rough. They can hide in it and shoot at us all they want. Besides, a band of Comanches is just over the hill, coming this way. Even if we could run off Crane's crew, we'd have the Indians to face. We have to get out of here—now."

Mrs. Zale pulled the twins against her, staring at Morgan. "But we can't go south if there are Indians there. And we can't go back north. They'd catch up with us, or that trail gang would." She sucked in a deep breath and then swung toward Kortner. "You and your shortcuts!" she exploded.

Morgan could see the ugliness forming on other faces, all of it directed at Kortner, who for once seemed unable to find anything to say.

"Quiet!" Morgan snapped. "There's no time for arguing now. We have one way out of here—west."

"But how?" Pardee demanded. "How do we get through all those barrancas? And then there are the sand dunes."

"That's right," Sam Tisdale said. "It'll be the same as Mrs. Zale pointed out, won't it? We'll be moving so slow, them Indians or that trail gang can catch us easy."

"They have to know where we went before they come after us," Morgan said. "If we move fast enough, we might get a fair start. Enough to give us a chance."

Kortner spoke for the first time since Morgan had returned: "You plan to take these wagons down into the barranca?"

"It's that or leave them and use horses," Morgan said flatly.

"No," Pardee said flatly. "I believe I speak for everyone here when I say that we are a wagon train, not fugitives. All that we own, our prized possessions, our—those things that are part of us, these we cannot leave." A murmur of assent went through the gathering. "We'll risk taking the wagons."

"Then start breaking camp," Morgan said. "And leave some wood. Just before we pull out, we'll build up the fires. The brighter they are, the more time Crane will take to sneak up. That'll give us a little more time before he finds we're gone."

Kortner stepped forward. "We've had a practice run at breaking camp," he said in what Morgan thought of as his "organizer" voice. "We can be on the move in thirty minutes."

He started issuing orders, and despite the feeling against him moments before, people obeyed. Much, Morgan thought, as if the habit was too strong to break. He was grateful for this, because Kortner's organizing ability was more valuable now than ever before. Inside of twenty-five minutes, the lead wagon was creaking out of the circle.

Kortner rode to Morgan. "I've done what I can," he said in a surprisingly humble tone. "From here on, you'll have to run things."

"You did more than I could have done in getting us underway," Morgan said. He had an inspiration and he added, "Tell the men not to build up the fires just yet. We'll get the whole outfit down into the barranca first. That way, there won't be a chance of Forkness or Calder up there on the hill seeing us moving out."

Kortner rode off, sitting importantly again. Morgan moved on, directing Pardee in the lead wagon to follow Dowling, who was ahead on his black horse. Then he moved along the train as it began to string out, detailing men to certain

positions. Tim Boyle and Billy Womack were to bring up the rear, staying long enough to build up the fires, and then ride guard at drag.

Nora's wagon held its usual position directly behind Pardee's, and Morgan pulled alongside her, thinking in surprise that he had not so much as had her in his mind these past hours. She had her hair down and knotted at the nape of her neck and a scarf covering the top of her head. The result was to throw her high cheekbones into prominence and to show the firmness of her set lips. Her carbine thrust up from a boot, handy to her right hand.

"It's rough down there," Morgan said, nodding to the west. "Can you handle your horses or shall I get one of the men to help?"

"I've handled them this far," she said. "I'll keep on trying."

"Good," Morgan said. "Just remember and don't ease up when you hit a smooth place. There's liable to be a rougher one than before beyond it. And if we wreck a wagon, it'll mean losing time we can't afford to lose."

Even with the help of the lightning, Morgan found this almost more of a job than he could handle. The wagons went down into the barranca with aching slowness, with frightening jolts that threatened to snap axles or break wheels. But finally Morgan was helping Betty Womack take her rig down, and then they were all at the bottom.

Climbing back to the high ground, Morgan called to Billy Womack and Tim to build up the fires. "Then get down behind the last outfit," he called.

The fires were blazing high and Tim and Billy Womack were already down in the barranca when Dowling joined Morgan. "Let's ride," Morgan said. "Pick your side."

Dowling looked east. "Crane won't be fooled long. He's too smart. He'll be after us before daylight. So I'll take the south rim."

"What's all this about Crane have to do with which rim you ride?"

"It's the easiest for horses to travel," Dowling answered. "Crane'll see that and lead his crew on that side. He'll be first, the way he always is, and I'll get my chance at him."

"You won't shoot him without warning," Morgan said. "You aren't the kind."

"No. I want him to see me first."

"If he sees you, he'll kill you," Morgan said flatly. "He can outshoot you with a rifle or a handgun."

"I'll have to take that chance," Dowling said. He swung his horse and rode off.

Morgan made a last check of the fires and then started along the north rim of the barranca. He was back on the smoke now and it felt better under him than the bay had.

He glanced eastward, fearful that he would see the first streaks of dawn there. By this time, Crane should have guessed what Morgan had done and be started after them. Morgan thought of the Indians. They would come onto the fires tomorrow, and it wouldn't take them long to read sign and know what had happened. Then they too would start west, hungry for the loot a wagon train offered.

Suddenly Morgan realized that the lightning was taking on a new character. The flashes slashed down out of the clouds now instead of flickering against them from the horizon. The roll of thunder came distantly but clearly after each flash of lightning. The heavy night cooled suddenly as a moist breeze reached out from the southeast and flicked across Morgan's face. A storm was riding the air currents flowing up from the Gulf of Mexico. And that could mean only rain—hard, deluging rain, Morgan knew.

Rain meant water, most often a blessing in this parched land. But it also meant danger, especially to a wagon train caught in the bottom of a barranca and helpless against the chance of a flash flood.

And then, as if to punctuate Morgan's thinking, a streak of lightning shot down not too far away. When the thunder had faded, he heard Dowling calling from the other side of the rim.

"They're coming up fast. I saw them in that lightning." He laughed a little hysterically. "I'm up here—and Crane is down there."

For a moment Morgan was puzzled by what Dowling meant. Then he thought, *of course!* Crane wouldn't waste time pacing the wagon train along the rimrock. He wanted the gold and he wanted it now.

With the next flash of lightning, Morgan looked for a way down to the wagons. But there was none. Like Dowling, he was caught up here—as good as out of the fight.

XIV

WITH THE next flash of lightning, Morgan rode as close to the rim as he dared risk. He sat the smoke quietly, fighting impatience, and waiting for still another brief bit of light. When it came, he raked his eyes downward. He could see the last two wagons of the train and see Tim and Billy Womack close behind them.

As the thunder echoes died away, Morgan cupped his hands to his mouth and called down, "Crane and his crew are coming up on you. Warn the others and find yourself some protection." Another flash allowed him to run the smoke along the rim until he could make out the lead wagons as they swung around a sharp bend in the barranca bottom. The lightning was coming almost steadily now, letting him see without the long periods of darkness interfering. But the thunder came within a heartbeat of each lightning flash, too loud for Morgan to lift his voice above it.

He kept the smoke paced with the slow-moving wagons. Looking back to watch the last rig come around the sharp bend, he noticed that he could see the entire bottom of the barranca from this position. He laughed with sudden pleasure, the sound battered back at him by the rolling thunder.

Marking the spot in his mind, Morgan moved the smoke along until once more he was above the lead wagons. He prayed for a brief break in the battering thunder, and when it came he shouted, "Pardeel! Get those wagons moving faster. And keep them going as hard as you can."

Kortner's voice came back up to him. "We're going to make a stand. We can't outrun horsemen."

He waited for another moment of quiet and cried, "The devil with the trail gang. Let Dowling and me worry about them. You've got a storm coming and you could get trapped down there by a flash flood." Thunder came again. He waited and then went on: "The barranca narrows up ahead and then it spreads twice as wide as it is now. You've

got to make the wide place before the storm really hits. And get well past it. Water will funnel through that gut like a runaway team and smash your wagons to kindling. Now get rolling!"

From across the barranca, Dowling cried, "Lowry, they're almost to the bend!"

Morgan shouted back, "We can stop them at that sharp corner. Let's ride back there. It's the only place we'll have any kind of angle on them."

In the next flash of lightning, he saw Dowling's arm lift. Then he turned the smoke and worked it back until he reached the spot where he was able to see the barranca bottom where it made the sharp turn. He drew his carbine. The lightning grew almost continuous now. It seemed to be hitting the ground just to the south of the barranca. The wind increased abruptly, and a gust of driving rain struck Morgan and the smoke, sending the animal twisting to put its rump to the storm.

Morgan wasted no effort in fighting the horse but turned himself in the saddle. He could see Dowling outlined across the way, his gun raised as he waited for his chance to kill Crane Yancey.

They came, sweeping around the bend in pairs. He recognized Crane in the lead with Forkness riding tight beside him. Taking careful aim, Morgan readied to fire. A gust of wind drove rain into his face, blinding him. He swore and blinked his eyes. Then there was darkness and he had to wait for the next flash of lightning.

When it came Morgan drew his bead, head bent against the slash of the water. He fired twice at Forkness' big frame. A shout rose above the fading echo of thunder. "They're above us! Get back around the bend." It was Crane's voice.

Morgan tried to see across the barranca, but the rain was too heavy now. But there was no sound of Dowling's gun from that direction. Why didn't the man shoot? Lightning came again, slashing down directly above the barranca. Once more Morgan fired, but now at the retreating rear of the last horse as it went back around the bend to safety.

"Dowling!" he cried. "Dowling?"

But now thunder drowned his voice. Thunder and wind and rain all seemed to pour down on him at the same in-

stant. And through it lead whispered up at him. He fired back blindly. Now even with the lightning he could see nothing against the solid wall of water slashing down from the sky. He left the saddle and drew the smoke farther back from the rim. Tying it, he went forward on foot, bellying down when he neared the edge, hoping that with this angle he would be able to see something below. Lead screamed over his head and he answered the faint flash with a bullet of his own.

Someone cried out and Morgan let his feelings free in a shout of triumph. Then the lightning and the thunder struck again, a steady blinding and battering as the storm passed directly over Morgan on its way northwest. For a long moment he could do nothing but bend his head against the wind and rain.

Suddenly he felt the ache of silence. He lifted his head. The wind had dropped and the rain had slacked off. The lightning was some distance beyond him now, and the thunder seemed less violent against his ears. Morgan let himself raise no hopes. He knew this country too well. The storm was only pausing for breath.

He started to call again to Dowling but a voice from below held him in check. He heard Forkness' deep rumble. "Water coming down the barranca."

"Let's get out of herel" a man cried. "It's ankle-deep to my horse already."

"Start riding," Crane Yancey commanded. "And keep shooting. Don't let them draw beads on us from up above."

"What about Tibbles?" someone called.

"You want to cart a dead man, that's your business," Crane answered. Now Morgan heard the hammer of hooves as horses raced around the bend and down the barranca.

Scrambling to his feet, Morgan hurried to the smoke and climbed into the saddle. The rain had started again but almost gently now, and he could hear the creaking of the wagons below before it began to grow heavy.

Then with no warning, the lightning struck again. It came from off Morgan's right shoulder and it brought a howling wind and a cascade of colder, vicious rain with it. Morgan swore luridly. The storm had turned and was coming back on itself. He turned in the saddle and tried to see down into

the barranca. Ahead, the angle of the rock wall cut off his view, but behind he could see the trail gang fighting its way down the rutted barranca floor. Water splashed up from the driving hooves of their horses. And even in the brief moment of vision, Morgan could see that it had deepened.

He pushed the smoke on, seeking a spot where he might be able to see the wagons. Finally they came into view as the ground began to drop and the sides of the great canyon sloped away less steeply from the bottom. They still hadn't reached the gut and already water was lapping well up toward the hubs of the wagon wheels. Morgan looked across, but there was no sign of Dowling at all now. He pulled the horse up short and glanced back the way he had come. The trail gang was making better time. They would be on the wagons within minutes.

Morgan turned his shoulder to the wind and rain and loaded his carbine. With the next lightning flash, he raised the gun and sent three shots slamming down into the barranca. A flurry of lead sent him pulling the smoke back out of range. Then shots came from ahead and below. Morgan sent the smoke to the rim again. He had a glimpse of Tim Boyle and Billy Womack standing their horses in the middle of the barranca, firing at the oncoming riders.

He fired down in an effort to help them. A bullet answered him, making the smoke whinny as it whistled by the animal's head. Now the rain had grown even heavier and Morgan was having trouble keeping the smoke turned into the storm, quartered on their right though it was. He fired again, but he was shooting blind now. The lightning had passed on, dying away; but its going seemed to be bringing more rain. Morgan had to duck his head to keep from sucking in water with every breath.

A steady drumming of gunshots came from below now. Occasionally, a bullet would whine its way up in Morgan's general direction, just close enough to keep him alert and to keep the smoke edgy. Twice more he emptied his gun into the barranca. Once he heard a cry but he had no way of knowing whether his shot or one from Tim and Billy Womack had done the damage.

Then Tim's clear voice said, "Billy, you hit?"

"Not bad."

Morgan shouted down, "Ride for the wagons, you two. We'll hold them back from up here."

A belated, weak flash of lightning gave him a brief picture of the barranca bottom. He saw Tim Boyle riding after the wagons, pulling Billy Womack's horse along while Billy clung to the saddle horn with both hands. He saw that the water had deepened and its current was beginning to grow.

Crane shot again. The smoke neighed shrilly and lifted all four hooves off the ground as lead creased its flank. Morgan tried to cling to the saddle but the jolt as the bucking horse landed was too sharp. He felt himself flung up and out into the rain-lashed darkness. The rushing ground struck him full force. He fought to bring air into his lungs, to drive away the darkness closing over him. And he felt himself fail.

XV

MORGAN AWOKE to the feel of sunshine warm on his face. The scent of wet dirt and grass filled his nostrils and he could feel the dampness of the ground beneath his body. He sat up, wincing as a lance of pain went through his skull. He put up a hand and found the gouge in his hat where something rough and sharp had torn the felt and raised a bump on his temple.

He rolled over and stared down at the rock he had been thrown against. It was within a foot of the edge of the barranca; when he looked past it, the sight below turned his insides hollow with shock.

From where he sat, he could make out the remains of a wagon, body and wheels ripped from one another. A pair of horses, twisted in their harness, lay motionless. A third, also still in harness, stood disconsolately, held to a single-tree jammed between a pile of boulders. Household goods lay in all directions, the pitiful remains of the possessions of a once hopeful family. Morgan winced as he recognized the once brightly colored, now muddied comforter that Tim Boyle's mother had worked on during the long, slow hours on the trail.

He stood up carefully and when the dizziness had passed

looked around. There was no sign of movement in any direction. Slowly, Morgan began walking along the edge of the barranca, looking for a slope easy enough to let him climb down. He found it a good quarter of a mile past the spot where he had awakened. Carefully, he lowered himself down the barranca wall, using rocks and roots to slow his descent.

He emptied his boots of sand and bits of rock and then started walking east. Reaching the smashed wagon, he searched the debris for a body. He found no one nor any sign that the wagon had been occupied when it was smashed by the wall of water.

He checked the three horses. The two downed animals had drowned, but the one on its feet looked solid enough. Morgan released it and stripped off all but the necessary amount of harness he would need for control. Then with a grunt he pulled himself onto its back. The horse rippled its heavy back muscles.

The horse plodded down the barranca. Ahead Morgan could see the narrow gut coming up, and when he reached it he was not surprised to find another smashed wagon. Like the first, this was empty of life, and most of the family's goods lay strewn wildly about. Morgan searched hopefully for a gun, having lost his own during his wild fall from the smoke, but there was nothing.

He was ready to move on when he heard the sounds funneling from the east. He listened a long moment and then quickly climbed aboard the big horse. "No lingering now, friend," he said. "Unless you want to pick Indian arrows out of your hide."

The horse seemed to sense the urgency, and with the aid of a few whacks from a harness strap across his hind-quarters, he managed a respectable trot. Jouncing along on top, Morgan passed sign after sign of the disaster that had struck the wagon train—sticks of firewood scattered about, smashed water barrels, the canvas cover from one of the larger wagons. But he saw no indication that any of the remaining four wagons had been smashed. Apparently they had all been far enough past the narrow gut when disaster struck. And, he thought, by another miracle those in the smashed wagons had managed to find safety somehow.

His mind turned to the trail gang, and he wondered if

any of them had been trapped by the towering wall of water that must have smashed from the east just after he had been thrown from the smoke. But count on Crane, Morgan thought sourly; he was the kind to find a way out.

He followed the ever widening barranca with the horse moving faster and faster as the footing grew smoother and less rock strewn. A sharp bend lay ahead and, Morgan knew, not far beyond that the barranca ended and the great swelling stretch of sand dunes began.

He swung the horse around the bend and brought the lumbering horse up with a sharp jerk. "Whoa, fellow!" Sunlight glinted from a gun barrel and shone on the tight features of Tim Boyle. The tightness disappeared abruptly, dissolved by a wide, unbelieving grin. "Morgan! Morgan Lowry!" the boy whooped.

"All of me," Morgan agreed. He looked past Tim. Four wagons were drawn together, their canvas steaming under the now hot sun. People worked around them, obviously trying to repair the damage the storm had caused.

"Is everybody accounted for?" Morgan asked.

"Everybody," Tim agreed. "When my folks and the Zales saw they weren't going to get through, they cut the Zale team loose and rode it ahead and piled in with Pardee and Nora. Lucky thing too. I was back there and I saw what the water did."

"I know," Morgan said. "What about Billy Womack?"

"Got a furrow sliced out of his ribs," Tim said. "He'll be all right." He added, "Betty ran their rig ahead and through the gut."

"What about the trail gang?"

Tim pointed to where an armed man patrolled the now low south rim of the barranca. Another rode back and forth along the west rim.

"They're out there someplace," Tim said. "They went riding past our train hell-bent and one jump ahead of the water. They didn't even slow down to say howdy to the gold, not last night. But we think they'll be back looking for it."

"They will," Morgan assured him. "And the Indians are coming from the east." He started the big horse past Tim. "We've got to get these wagons underway."

He rode to the knot of wagons, nodding as people called his name in pleasure. He felt a special warmth and a sense of relief in Nora's smile as she looked up from tending the Boyle baby.

"When your horse came in empty this morning, we thought . . ." she said and stopped. She flushed.

He moved away from her to where Pardee and Kortner were trying to do something about a badly bent axle and a crazily canted left hind wheel on the Womacks' little rig.

Pardee greeted him with less than his usual reserve. Even Kortner's nod had cordiality in it. Morgan said, "The Indians aren't far back. The wrecked wagons will hold them awhile—a few hours at most. Then they'll come looking for the rest of the train. You'd best pack everything into the wagons that can travel and get moving."

"Moving where?" Kortner demanded. "You're the one who led us off the trail. Now you tell us where we are and how we get to the Pecos. I rode to the end of the barranca and all I could see was sand."

"That's all there is," Morgan admitted. "But we can skirt the edge of those dunes. We won't make much time, loaded the way we'll be, but a week should see us to the river."

"A week—without water? With almost no firewood?"

Pardee said softly, "We lost all our water kegs, Morgan. We don't have ten gallons of drinkable water among us, nor any way to carry more if we found it."

Morgan started to say, "I rode across those dunes not long ago and . . ." But the words never came out. He felt strangely light-headed suddenly, and a peculiar blankness seemed to fill his mind. He blinked, wondering if that blow on the head had done more damage than he had thought. He could remember the dunes, but they were as if from a dream—vague, formless shapes dancing behind his eyes. And what he had intended to say lay somewhere deep in mist.

He said instead, "No matter. The Indians aren't coming to give us a hand, you know. We go on with only ten gallons of water or we don't go at all. That's our choice."

A light breeze rippled across Morgan's face, cooling it. He said, "What about Dowling? What happened to him?"

"We don't know," Pardee answered simply. "He never appeared."

Morgan got down off the big horse. "Then we'll have to do without him."

He found that he couldn't move too quickly nor bend and straighten too suddenly. Then the lightness came back into his head and dark spots danced warningly behind his eyes. Even so, he managed to do his share of getting as much as possible packed into the three rigs belonging to Pardee, Nora, and the Tisdales. With Sam Tisdale's help, Morgan managed to fix the wagons so that each had a six horse team pulling it. The other livestock—the few head of cattle and the saddle horses that weren't being ridden—were tied to the tailgate of the last wagon.

Morgan found the smoke and saw that someone had taken care of the bullet burn on its flank, smearing it with axle grease to keep off flies. His saddle was intact and he moved it onto the bay. Climbing into the saddle, he felt better. The lightness in his head seemed less now that he was off his feet. He moved along the line of three wagons, checking harness.

He stopped as Nora said from the wagon box, "When did you eat last?"

Morgan grinned and ran a hand over the beard stubble sprouting on his lean cheeks. "Come to think of it, I can't remember."

"So I guessed from your color. If you don't want to fall off that horse too, eat this." She held out some bread and meat and Morgan took it.

"There's no water to spare for coffee," she said.

"And no time to make any," Morgan said around a mouthful of food. "Thanks."

The food was dry and a little hard to swallow, but he found that its weight in his belly seemed to help tie his head more tightly to his shoulders. With that and a spare rifle and handgun that had been found for him, he felt considerably better. He rode back to where Tim stood guard at the rear.

"I'll ride drag awhile. You tell the men up on the rim to keep pace with us and not to stop looking. Crane won't have given up yet."

He stood up in the saddle. "Start them rolling!" he shouted. The lead wagon began to creak forward. Nora's followed,

and then the Tisdale rig got under way. They made fair time, despite their heavy loads, for the first half mile. Then, suddenly, Pardee drew his big wagon to a stop, forcing the others to pull up. Morgan rode forward.

"What is it?"

Pardee lifted a hand and pointed. He had come to the top of a slight slope and there, stretching west and north and south as far as any man's eyesight could see, were the dunes. "Mountains," Pardee whispered. "Mountains of nothing but sand. Do they go on forever?"

"It can seem like it," Morgan said. He looked straight south, along the narrow tracks where the dunes ended and the rougher country began. "If we can keep between the ends of the barrancas and the dunes, we can make better time," he said.

A whoop from Tim Boyle's father, riding to the south, got everyone's attention.

"Rider coming!"

Morgan put his horse up the low ridge where Boyle watched. A lone rider was making good time, angling from the southeast. His horse was black and for a moment Morgan thought it was Crane Yancey. Then he recognized Dowling. In a moment the man was alongside them. His clothes were torn, shredded in places, and his face was covered with thin cuts and dark bruises. But he seemed alive enough.

"The devil!" Morgan said. "What did you tangle with?"

Dowling scowled down at the horse under him. "I had my bead on Crane when a bolt of lightning hit not ten feet away. This critter went straight up in the air and when he came down, I was hanging from one stirrup. I got pretty well chewed up before I stopped him."

He sounded strangely apologetic. "I don't know where I was and I didn't even learn I was a good two miles from the barranca until this morning. I blacked out sometime or other. When I came to I was still in the saddle and still breathing, so I came hunting you."

Morgan told him tersely what had happened and what their plan was. Dowling studied the dunes and then looked south. He shook his head. "We can't go that way. I just came up from there, and about two barrancas down I

smelled smoke. I couldn't get close enough to the camp to see who was there, but I managed to hear."

His voice thickened with bitterness. "Crane and Forkness and three others," he said. "I heard them trying to figure a way to finish the job they started out to do. If we go south along the edge of the dunes, we'll ride straight into them."

"North," Boyle said. "If we go north . . ." He looked that way and stopped talking. North the country was clearly too rough for travel. In that direction the dunes pushed up against land that looked as if it had been gouged by a giant pickax.

"That leaves us no choice," Morgan said. "We go into the dunes and try to circle around Crane and then get back on solid ground."

Dowling's nod was confirmation. Morgan swung the bay around and returned to where Pardee waited in the lead wagon. Morgan told him what he had just heard. Pardee stared at the great swells of pale sand. It shined brightly under a sun now well past its zenith, and they could feel the heat slashing back from the smooth surface.

"There? With so little water? With no trail to follow? And how can the horses pull these loads without dying from exhaustion?"

"We'll just have to go slow," Morgan said. He pointed to the first great mounds directly ahead of them. "If we can get over that sand hill, there'll be a valley on the other side. The bottom will be a little easier traveling. And with luck, the wind will wipe out our sign so that even if the Indians had a mind to ride into the dunes, they wouldn't be sure of finding us there."

Pardee nodded dumbly. He lifted the reins and started his team. Morgan said, "Get them going as fast as you can. Let things inside bounce. But you've got to have some motion going to get up that dune. It's steep and it's high." He started off and turned back. "As soon as I explain to the others, I'll ride on ahead. If you see me wave my hat, that means a soft spot. Then swing to one side or the other."

He sent the bay back to Nora and the Tisdales, telling them briefly what they had to do. Then, seeing that Dowling and Boyle were riding drag, looking back for the Indians,

he pushed the little horse ahead of Pardee's now rocking and swaying wagon and onto the sand.

The footing so far was fair enough. But ahead the dune began, and that was where Morgan feared the trouble would come. He kept the bay going, now and then finding a soft spot, signaling, and moving sideways until he located more solid going. When Pardee started up the side of the dune, Morgan knew that he could do no more in front. He swung back and came alongside the lumbering wagon.

"You're slowing down!" he cried. "Give them the whip!"

"I have all I can do handling the reins," Pardee answered. Morgan swallowed a desire to swear and stepped from the horse to the wagon box. He took the reins and lifted the whip from its socket. He snapped the whip so that it cracked like a rifle shot just above the ears of the off leader.

"Hiya! Move, you lumps of crowbait! Move!" The whip cracked again. The horses surged against their harness and briefly the wagon gained speed. Then, slowly, aching, it began to lose its momentum. The horses continued to strain but their hooves could find no solid purchase. The sand deepened, dragging at tired muscles, pulling at wheels already driven deep by the heavy loads in the wagon beds. And finally the wagon stopped, with half the slope stretching ahead.

They weren't going to make it, Morgan realized. They were caught here, in full view of whoever came first—the Indians or the trail gang.

XVI

MORGAN'S MOMENT of bleak despair passed in a surge of anger at his indulgence in self-pity. He shouted for the men to join him.

"All right," he said, "let's get the women and kids out of here and on the other side of the dune." He swung in Nora Fuller's direction. "Take guns with you," he directed.

Without waiting for an answer, he signaled to Sam Tisdale. "We can get all the wagons over the hill if we hook the three teams up to them one at a time. Can you do it?"

Tisdale spat cotton from his mouth. "Can't do more than try," he said.

The men moved about awkwardly on sand that kept sliding maddeningly from under their boots. The horses, already exhausted from their efforts, stood dully in their harness, waiting for someone to help them. It took Morgan only minutes to realize that there were too many people involved in the operation. They kept slipping and getting in one another's way. So he sent Tim and his father downslope to stand guard and detailed Zale and Pardee to help Billy Womack over the hump to join the women. With Dowling's experienced help and Kortner's awkward but surprising strength, he and Sam Tisdale rigged all three six horse teams to Pardee's wagon.

Zale and Pardee had returned and now seven men dug their boots into the sand and put their shoulders against anything solid they could reach.

Morgan shouted, "Hit it, Sam!"

The whip snapped with authority, and Sam Tisdale's farmer's voice shouted out an order. At the same time, the men at the rear dug in and pushed. The wagon creaked and the wheels made a good quarter of a turn.

"More!" Morgan gasped.

The whip snapped again. Morgan could feel the effort sending blood pounding through his head. A salty taste filled his mouth and a wild dance of black dots formed behind his eyes. His mind shouted, "Roll! Roll, damn you!"

Then so suddenly that he had no warning, the wagon began a steady creaking and pulled up the slope. Six men went to their hands and knees, gasping. Morgan dropped onto his face and lay still. He thought he was going to pass out, but before anyone could reach him, he found the strength to roll over and then sit up. They all watched the wagon making its slow but steady progress up to the top of the dune and then disappear down the far side.

They grinned at one another and Morgan found breath enough to say, "That was the heaviest one. The other two should be easier."

"Especially if we go get the horses to help pull them with," Dowling said in one of his rare moments of humor. He studied Morgan closely. "You stay put. It doesn't take all of us to bring three teams back."

"Saving me for yourself?" Morgan asked.

"That's right." Dowling turned away. Morgan remained seated, knowing that he needed to guard all of his remaining strength. The blaze of the sun was less now but the sand seemed to have stored a tremendous amount of heat and all of it felt to Morgan to be blasting up into his face. He closed his eyes, thinking to rest them briefly against the glare. But when he looked around again, the teams were being hitched to Nora's wagon, and he realized he had fallen into a stupor.

Rising, he went to do his share. As he had said earlier, the second and third wagons were easier to move. Tired as they were, the big teams had little trouble getting both wagons underway and over the top of the dunes and down the far side. As the Tisdale rig disappeared, Morgan climbed aboard the bay and followed. He stopped at the top of the dune and looked back east and south.

The sun had set now but the evening light was clear. Through it, he could see no sign of Indians or of Crane's gang. There was no movement at all. Fine, Morgan thought. That meant extra time. And it meant—

It meant nothing at all, he realized. Because Crane and his men had appeared on the trail edging the dunes and they were riding this way as hard as they could push their horses, and all five men had their rifles laid across their saddle bows.

Morgan turned and called down, "All of you men, ride up near the top of the dunes and then get off your horses. Belly down so you can see over. Crane and his crew are coming. When they get in range, start shooting. Enough guns might change their minds."

Dowling, working with Sam Tisdale on untangling the teams from their complicated harness, left his job, climbed on his black, and put it up the slope and alongside Morgan.

"You going to sit here to draw their fire?" he demanded. "Crane's a pretty good shot. I'd pull back if I was you."

"While you stay here and do what?" Morgan glanced toward the camp to see the men doing as he had ordered and, sensibly, spreading themselves in a line along the ridge of the dune. He looked back at Dowling. "Don't tell me you'll shoot Crane. I figure you had a chance last night—before that lightning bolt spooked your horse."

Dowling pulled his carbine half from the boot and then pushed it back. "It's not a thing I'm proud of, damn you. I sat there with a bead fixed on him, and I was stiff as a frozen hunk of venison. Stiff with cold and running with sweat."

"No matter what you want to do, it's not in you to kill Crane," Morgan said almost gently. "It's not your responsibility."

"It ain't yours either," Dowling said angrily. "But, by God, it's got to be done." The anger drained away, leaving emptiness. "I keep telling myself that it's got to be done—but I can't make myself do it." He pulled his horse back below the crest of the dune, took his gun, and stepped to the sand. Morgan joined him, and together they crawled back to belly down where they could watch the oncoming riders.

The wind, softer for a while as the sun was setting, now began to stir itself again. It came out of the northwest, peppering the back of Morgan's neck with sharp, gritty particles. He watched with interest as it swirled over low ridges of sand, smoothing them away, and carrying their tops through the air at ever-rising speeds.

"By the time Crane gets opposite us, he'll be turning into a sandstorm," Morgan observed. "The wind has switched around on us."

"Head-on," Dowling agreed. He paused and then added, "The damn fool is going to try it! He's in an almighty hurry to get that gold!"

Morgan lifted an arm and pointed toward the mouth of the barranca. "And for a good reason. Here come the Comanches."

He lifted his rifle and sighted. With the wind coming at an angle across his shoulder and the sand blowing enough to make the growing dimness misty, he knew he would be lucky to hit what he was aiming for. He sighted and fired. A satisfied grunt came from him as he saw Crane's head come up as lead whipped close by it.

Morgan waved his hat. "Indians!" he shouted. "Coming out of the barranca. Indians!"

He had the advantage of the wind to carry his voice but Crane seemed not to understand. He said something to his

men and they pulled up, turning so as to put their shoulders against the driving sand and trying to squint at the ridge. Their guns lifted, but they obviously could not fight the sand, and they sat quietly as if hoping the wind would die.

Morgan called to the men along the ridge. "Shoot for the feet of their horses. You won't hit anything with this cross-wind, so try to scare them back—before they get scalped."

A half dozen guns cracked almost together. Even through the growing murk, Morgan could see sand spurt as bullets spat it up. All the shots were well short, and two of them off to one side of Crane and his crew. Still the five merely sat. Morgan could have sworn he saw Crane's teeth flash in a smile of derision.

If so, the smile disappeared fast enough. From behind Crane and his men a gun cracked. Forkness' big body lifted up out of the saddle and flopped to the sand. He rolled over twice and lay still. Now Crane and the others turned. Crane's gun raised and he fired two quick shots toward the barranca. His heels hit the flanks of his horse and it raced off southeast at a sharp angle, seeking solid ground as quickly as possible.

The other three men turned to follow. A fusillade of shots met them as they reined around. Two went down. A third leaped free of his falling horse and began to run up the slope, scrambling and sliding in his panic. Two more shots crashed in the dimness and he fell, pawing the ground for some time before he rolled over and lay motionless.

Morgan dropped down behind the dune, his eyes straining to see if the Indians would come after them. He doubted it, not with this sand blowing as it was, and not with the darkness closing down; he judged the party would be safe enough, at least for tonight.

Dowling and Tim Boyle volunteered to stand the first guard, and Morgan with the others went downslope to the camp. Here the wind was almost nonexistent. So far it was whipping the sand from the tops of the great dunes well above the wagons. But as they wore down, it would reach here, Morgan knew, and if the gale grew stronger that could be soon.

"We're all tired," Morgan said as the people grouped around him. "But the Indians are at the edge of the sand,

just waiting for daylight and for the courage to come in here after us. It was in my mind to try to ride out the storm here tonight, but if we do, we may find ourselves half buried by morning." He glanced around. A small fire showed weary features and deep concern. "A storm like this can change dunes into valleys and valleys into dunes overnight."

"You want us to move along, is that it?" Pardee asked.

"If we can put enough distance between ourselves and the Indians by morning, we'll have a better chance," Morgan answered.

"The animals need food and water and rest," Pardee said. "We all do."

"Feed the kids and give them each a swallow of water," Morgan instructed. "Wash the horses' mouths out with wet cloths and then give them some grain. And chew on damp rags yourselves. That's the best we can do for tonight."

"The teams can't go far after what they went through today," Sam Tisdale said.

"I know," Morgan agreed. "Nor can we. But we'll push it as much as we dare and try to stop before the horses die in their traces."

He looked around again. Some expressions were dull, agreeing, uncaring. Others were stubborn, fighting him. He added softly, "And maybe that'll help keep us from dying—here."

The stubbornness remained, not yielding to him. Then Tim Boyle bolted his horse down the hill and into the camp. His face was an ugly white in the firelight.

"The Indians," he said. "They're out there—scalping those trail robbers." He made a gagging sound. "And one of them is still alive. He—he was still moaning when they left him."

Morgan felt the attitude around him change. Mrs. Zale pulled the twins close to her side. "We'll go on tonight," she said flatly.

No one showed any signs of wanting to argue with her.

XVII

MORGAN REMEMBERED helping get the wagons underway, and he remembered lifting himself wearily and carefully

into the saddle. He even remembered the first groaning of the heavily laden wagons as they started down the narrow sand valley walled in by the towering dunes. Beyond that, he remembered nothing.

He opened his eyes to lamplight and to the realization that he was lying full-length on a pad of blankets. Outside it was dark, but the strong, steady movement of the wagon bed under him said clearly that they were making a night trek.

Morgan sat up suddenly and then fell back, his head spinning. Someone behind him moved and he felt a hand on his arm, helping him to a sitting position. This time he came up slowly and carefully so that the dizziness passed quickly. He was in Pardee's big wagon.

He turned his head and saw Nora Fuller, her expression grave but at the same time filled with relief. "We thought you'd never wake up!" The back of her hand touched his forehead. "But when your fever broke this morning, I began to hope."

He said dully, his throat aching from dryness, "Fever?"

"A terrible one. You've been unconscious since night before last. That bump on your head during the storm must have given you a concussion."

Morgan found that for all of his light-headedness, he felt surprisingly good. "I don't know what the bump did except I haven't lost my appetite."

She laughed a little and turned away. When she returned, she carried a cup of water and some bread wrapped around finely shredded meat. Morgan stared at the cup.

"I can't take this much water away from the folks."

"It's all right," she said. "It rained last night, and Mr. Dowling showed us how to use our canvases to catch some and he had us soak every bit of cloth we had—clothing and everything. We squeezed the clothes and emptied the canvases and all our pails and buckets are full. The horses had a good drink and we even had coffee this morning."

Morgan took a sip, rinsing out his mouth before swallowing. He took a second sip to cut the aching dryness in his throat. Then he returned the cup to her. "Save the rest of it," he said. "Even by the shortest way, we still have a good five or six days to go, and we might not see any more water."

"But it should rain again. Mr. Kortner said this part of the country is noted for its summer thunderstorms."

Morgan said thinly, "Not too long back, I stood with a pair of Indians on a dune crest and watched it pouring rain into the sand not a half mile away—and we were half dead for want of water."

She said nothing and he added, "Kortner's as big a fool about that as he is about staying close to the east edge of the sand."

She stared at him. "But how else can we keep from getting lost? What other landmark do we have?"

"I don't know," Morgan admitted. He pressed his hands to his temples as if he could squeeze memories out of the mists that still filled most of his mind whenever he thought of that previous trip through this country. There was so much he could remember in sharp, clear detail . . . and so much he could remember only vaguely, formlessly.

"I only recall that I came into the dunes about the middle of the southern side and followed almost a straight line to the mouth of that barranca we came out of." He added as if to himself, "Somewhere it seems like we had a drink—a long drink—and after that there were long days with no water at all. It . . ." He broke off, frowning. "It just won't come out."

She said softly, "You said 'we.' You were with two Indians. What about them? Tell me everything you can remember."

Morgan finished his food. "They were Kiowas," he said slowly. "They'd been scouting for the Cavalry and they were going back home when they ran into a band of renegade Comanches. They rode for the sand, knowing the Comanches weren't eager to go into it very far, and they were doing all right until about the time they caught up to where I was riding along. Then they ran out of bullets. I managed to lay down enough lead to slow down the renegades and let all three of us get into the dunes."

He stopped and frowned again. "That's all clear as a piece of fancy glass. I can even remember the Indians leading the way. I think we found some water somehow about the second day. But I might only have dreamed it. I know

the smoke and I got pretty thirsty before we found some puddles up that barranca."

"The Indians knew their way?" Nora persisted.

"That's right," Morgan said. "They'd been through here before."

"And they led you in a straight line across the sand instead of along the edge of it?"

"Part way," Morgan said. The words came reluctantly as each idea was dragged from the mists of his mind by force of will. "They cut off sometime the fourth day and went east."

"But you kept on. You didn't get lost." She put her hands on his arm. "Don't you see, they must have told you how to keep a straight line."

Morgan squeezed his temples again. "They must have," he agreed. "But I can't get it up in the front of my mind." He looked around at the canvas stretched over their heads. "There was something about . . ."

He broke off, swallowing a desire to swear at himself. "It won't come."

Nora stood up. "Are you strong enough to walk for a little while?"

Morgan stood up carefully and braced himself against the swaying of the wagon. With Nora's hand on his arm, he made his way to the rear. He could feel the food taking hold and by the time he was outside, he knew that he had not lost too much of his strength. Even so, he said, "It'll be better if we ride."

With Nora on the bay and Morgan on the smoke, they rode ahead of the slowly plodding train and to the crest of the dune hemming them in on the west. The moon was well out now and from his position Morgan could see that the hard ground lay just east of the dune on the other side of the miniature valley.

Two riders were outlined against the sky as they patrolled the dune crest, one ahead and one behind the wagon train. Morgan said, "At least someone had sense enough to post a guard."

"Mr. Dowling," Nora said. She added reluctantly, "Mr. Kortner said the Indians wouldn't bother us, that they were gone. But yesterday morning we were camped almost on

the edge of the sand and they came charging out of nowhere. If it hadn't been for the guards warning us . . ." She shuddered. "Fortunately the sand was heavy enough to slow their horses and we managed to drive them off. Then we had to drive for hours in the sun to get to a place where we were away from the edge. But this valley keeps going back to it."

Morgan nodded. "Kortner hasn't learned about Indians yet. What they're most likely doing is camping at night and then riding at dawn. They can cover as much distance in a couple of hours out there as you can in a whole night here. Sooner or later, they figure we'll ride out of the sand or try to get out for water.

"Besides, going off at an angle is shorter. I remember now. The Indians told me the edge curls around and adds an extra three or four days to a horseback trip."

She said quickly, "What else do you remember?"

Morgan opened his mouth and then closed it. "Nothing yet." He rode his horse a good half mile beyond the lead wagon and then stepped to the sand. Nora joined him and together they walked down the side of the dune into a shallow cup. Here he stopped and stared up at the sky.

Nora's fingers touched his hand. "It would be something in the sky, wouldn't it, Morgan? There aren't any other landmarks but the stars!"

"That's it," Morgan said. "They faced north and off to the east and they pointed right to—" He broke off, his arm raised. "It isn't there." His head turned. "It was a big, bright star in a kind of triangle—like that one more overhead than off to the east!"

"Vega, in Lyra," Nora said. "And it is the same star, Morgan. It's moved since you came through." He stared at her and she laughed softly. "After all, I am a schoolteacher. I should know a little something."

"So should I," Morgan said. "I've guided myself times enough by the stars. But that knock on the head seems to have shaken everything I ever knew out of me."

"It'll come back."

Morgan said, "The Indians told me to aim straight at the bright star—Vega, only they had another name for it. I kept it like they said and hit the barranca." He turned and looked

over his shoulder. "It being higher up now, if I line up in this direction and we keep it just off my right shoulder, we should come out about the place where I first hit this sand."

He swung back to her. "And if we do, we'll be less than a day from the river. From all the water we want!"

"And we'll be safe from the Indians?"

"Safer," Morgan said. "I seem to recall one place where the hard ground cuts deep into the sand. Someplace where there's a landmark of some kind and . . ." He broke off. "It feels important, but I can't remember why."

"Maybe you will when you see the landmark." She touched his hands again. "I'm glad you're well enough to lead us."

Morgan looked down at her face. The moonlight hid the drawn, tired look, and it glowed from the depths of her eyes. He said, "Is that why you nursed me—so I could lead you again?"

"You're making me commit myself again, aren't you?" she whispered. "You're taking away all my defenses." She gave a short, soft laugh. "But I don't care—not now."

And then he drew her to him without resistance. His head dipped, fusing their lips in a brief kiss. Her body pressed to him and he could feel her trembling. He was the one to draw away.

XVIII

BY THE END of the third night of traveling southwest, Morgan began to wonder if his memory had played a trick on him. Search as he might from the crest of the tallest dune, he could see no sign of any landmark. Yet deep inside he was still certain there had been one—and that it held more meaning than just the assurance they were going in the right direction.

He stood on a sharply peaked dune and stared eastward. The sun had just set and the heat of their fourth day since Morgan's recovery was beginning to lessen. Even so, waves of it still shimmered from the sand, making the eastern horizon unclear. There was something over there, but whether he looked at hills or clouds or merely the coming darkness he couldn't tell.

He lowered his gaze to the camp in the hollow below where he stood. The people were moving about, rousing themselves from their restless sleeping during the heat of the day and preparing to get the wagon train started as soon as the evening meal was finished. Across the hollow, Sam Tisdale rode a lone watch. Since they had turned away from the edge of the sand, there had been no sign of Indians and so the careful guarding had eased off.

Boots crunched in sand and Morgan turned to see Dowling and Pardee slogging their way up to him. Dowling said bluntly, "I thought you told us we'd see some kind of landmark two or three days after we turned in this direction."

"So I did," Morgan agreed.

Pardee's voice was still mild and gentle. "Are we lost?"

"Kortner probably thinks so," Morgan said dryly, "but I don't." He added frankly, "For a few minutes I did, but then I started wondering just why three nights of steady travel didn't get us where I expected it to."

He grimaced a little. "I came through here on a horse. He was dried out and footsore and hungry, but even so he moved faster than a wagon train. And where the smoke and I could keep a pretty straight line up a dune and down into a valley and up another dune if need be, the wagons have to find an easy slope, loaded the way they are. That means we're getting off course four or five times a night—every time we move from one valley to another—and it takes time to correct us back."

Pardee went slowly down the hill. Dowling said, "Just how bad off are we?"

Morgan said, "I have a hazy memory of water somewhere, but it was only two days at the most after the Indians and I rode into the sand. Then after another two days, they left. It's in my mind that I rode three days more before I came to the barranca, and I was going pretty slowly the last stretch. The smoke didn't have enough left in him to carry me."

"Let's say five days from water to the barranca. Make that ten, or maybe nine, for the wagon train to cover the same distance. Is that about right?"

"I'd say," Morgan agreed.

"Then it's still a good three more nights of travel before

we come to water." Dowling looked at Morgan steadily. "If we come to it. If you remember right."

"I don't—yet," Morgan said. "But when the time comes . . ."

By the end of the fifth night of travel since Morgan's recovery there was only water enough to wet rags for chewing or for wiping out the mouths of the horses. And Morgan saw that the people were finally beginning to realize the truth in his warnings. Yet it was he they turned on and not Kortner as their fears grew. No one spoke to him about it, but he could read the accusation in their drawn faces, see it in their dulled eyes.

And then as the first dawn broke at the end of the next night, the rumble of thunder broke through the monotonous hissing of sand under hooves and wheels. "Storm coming!" Kortner cried in a cracked voice. He was riding a horse and he walked it as fast as it could go along the short line of wagons.

"Didn't I tell you? There's rain coming!"

"Wait until you can taste it," Morgan answered. He glanced off to the southeast where the lightning split the sky. Thick clouds boiling up obscured the coming daylight, and the great shafts of hard white light drove out of them toward the ground. "It could be moving this way," he said cautiously.

Kortner said excitedly, "We'd better stop and get the canvases and buckets ready."

"Not yet," Morgan told him. "Let's take a look first." He rode the smoke to the crest of the dune on their right. Kortner hesitated a moment and then followed.

Wind, promisingly damp, ruffled Morgan's face. "It'll be light enough to see the rain coming in a little while," he said.

"I can smell it. And look at the storm. It's heading right for us!" Kortner cried. "What more do you want?"

"Luck," Morgan said simply.

He moved the smoke slowly along but still fast enough to gain distance on the wagon train. It was growing lighter and the outlines of the clouds could be seen. They were bunched in a single, bellied out mass, and they rode the wet wind that blew now straight into Morgan's face. The lightning grew less bright as the daylight increased, but the

quickness and loudness of the thunder said clearly enough that the storm was coming nearer.

"Look," Kortner said. "You can see the rain coming down now."

The wind veered a little, quartering on Morgan's cheek as it went more westerly. "I can see it," Morgan agreed. "And if it doesn't change direction, it's going to pass up front of us."

Kortner said thickly, "No! No!" And then as the clearly outlined veil of water swept across the sand, he cried, "It's moving away from us. Maybe we can catch—"

He started to rein his horse toward the wagons. Morgan reached out a hand and jerked his mount's head around roughly. "Don't be a damned fool! You can't run after a storm moving that fast. And if you could, what is there to run with? Those teams can't go any faster than they're moving right now!"

Kortner made a sobbing sound in his throat as he watched the storm continue on westward, sending its deluge of water into the thirsty sand a good mile from where they sat their horses. The lightning began to thin out and the thunder rumbled more softly as it moved farther away.

"If we hadn't come out in the middle of this—this place like you insisted, we might be under that storm!"

"We wouldn't have been within two days or more of it," Morgan answered. "Didn't your precious books have maps to show you how the east edge of these dunes curves off in one direction and then another? At least we're following a straighter line toward the Pecos."

"What good does that do us?" Kortner shouted. "We'll never see the river—any of us."

But Morgan was paying no attention to him. Instead, he was staring into the east. The clouds had blown away from the horizon now and in the washed air, cleared of heat haze, he could see the distant hills. And the peak. The upthrust of weathered rock that from this angle looked something like an old, crushed sombrero.

Morgan let out a shout and sent the smoke down the slope and toward the wagons. People stared at him as he drew alongside Pardee's wagon and began tugging a shovel free of the lashings that held it to the wooden side.

"What's the matter with you?" Pardee demanded. "Are you ill, man?"

Morgan said, "Don't stop when the sun comes up. Keep these wagons rolling. And put every spare man on the east crest up there—armed."

"The horses are exhausted," Pardee said. "They can't go—"

"Damn it," Morgan roared. "If you want to stay alive, do as I tell you." Swinging the smoke, he urged it up the narrow sand valley, the shovel laid across his saddle bow.

Excitement made him shake and he fought an urge to try to heel the smoke into riding faster. The sight of that upthrust of rock had brought the memories back—if his mind hadn't tricked him. He would know soon, he thought. He rode with his head turned toward the rock in the distance. Now and then the crest of the dune cut off his view, but as the dune became lower and lower, he could see the rock more and more clearly.

Not long now, and he would know. The valley turned sharply to the right. Morgan kept the smoke going straight ahead, slanting up the side of the dune and onto its crest. And from here he could see the long brown tongue of bare land that came reaching in from the east. It twisted and turned, now a quarter of a mile wide, now barely a few yards. Then it ended at the base of a dune.

Morgan sent the smoke to the west side of that dune, down in a flat-bottomed hollow. He looked due east and saw that he was facing the sombrero-shaped rock. Lifting the shovel he dropped to the sand and began digging.

By the time the first horseman rode into the bowl, Morgan was drenched with the last sweat he had in him. Four piles of sand lay scattered about and he was busily making a fifth as he thrust the shovel into the loose, fine dirt and scooped it free.

"What the devil are you doing?" Dowling demanded.

"I might be digging our graves," Morgan panted. He thrust the shovel in again and brought up a heavy dribble of sand. He stopped and looked back at the two men riding the crest of the dunes. "Get more men on watch!" he ordered. Then he fell to digging again.

Nora rode down on the bay, dropped to the ground, and went to him. "Morgan?"

He paid no attention to her but continued to thrust his shovel into the sand. It was frustrating work, with as much of the dry sand dribbling back into the hole as fell on the pile. But slowly the mound beside the hole grew until it was half again as high as the others. Then, suddenly, the shovel load Morgan brought up no longer fell loosely away. It clung, dark and damp, to the blade.

Morgan threw the shovel aside and fell to his knees. He plunged his arms into the hole and when he rocked back both hands held a gobbet of dripping wet sand.

"Water!" Dowling cried. "Water." He swung his black and raced away to spread the news to the wagons, so close now that their creaking could be heard.

Morgan dropped the wet sand and began digging again. Soon he stopped. "It's nothing but water down there now." He dipped both palms and held them out to Nora. Kneeling, she leaned forward and sucked the sandy water up with her lips.

"You remembered."

The wagons came into sight, people running ahead of them in their eagerness to reach the water. "There'll be plenty for all," Morgan said. "This place is one big hollow with a hardpan bottom. After that rain, it should be pretty well filled. So—"

He broke off as Tim Boyle, riding the crest of the dune, shouted, "Rider coming!"

Morgan swung onto the smoke and sent it up the sliding sand slope to the crest. The rider was fairly close, but he was angling away from them, leaving the sand for the hard ground that stretched tongue-like toward the hollow. "Where the devil did he come from?"

"Out of the dunes," Tim Boyle said. "He must have been behind us. But why's he running in that direction?"

"He isn't," Morgan said dryly. He watched as the rider reached the hard ground, paused briefly and then sent his horse at a solid trot directly toward them. And now Morgan could make out both horse and rider.

As he had thought, it was Crane Yancey on his blaze-faced black.

Morgan turned the smoke back down the hill. Crane came up and over the last dune and down into the hollow before the first of the people moving ahead of the wagons reached the water. He flung himself from his horse at the edge of the last hole and plunged both arms down deep. Only when he brought them up dripping did Morgan see that he held a pair of now overflowing canteens.

Crane stood up and grinned at Morgan. "I figured you'd find some sooner or later. When I heard Abel yelling the news, I suddenly got a powerful thirst."

He tipped one of the canteens up and let water run down his throat. He lowered the canteen as Dowling came down the hill past the wagons.

"Crane, by God!" he cried thickly.

Morgan drew Nora aside and waited. Crane stood, both hands still occupied with the canteens, his gun in its holster. "You wouldn't shoot an unarmed man, would you, brother?" he asked mockingly. "But if you plan to, at least let me have a decent drink first."

"You haven't suffered from lack of water or anything else," Dowling said. "Both you and the horse are in too good shape."

Crane capped his canteens, hung them on his saddle, and swung aboard his blaze-faced black. "You're getting more clever, living around Morgan," he said. Abruptly the black surged into motion as he dug spurs into its flanks. Dowling was still staring after him, gun only half lifted, when Crane and his horse crested a dune to the west and disappeared.

In a moment the hollow was almost filled with wagons and stock and people digging and dipping buckets frantically. And then, as quickly as they'd begun, they stopped. Tim Boyle's cry froze them.

"Indians coming! A whole herd of them! Straight down that tongue of hard ground!"

"Swing the wagons into a triangle," Morgan ordered. "Get the stock and the women inside." He turned the smoke and started for the crest of the dune. Dowling came tight beside him.

Tim Boyle and Zale had already pulled their horses back out of sight and were bellied down where they could see

over the crest. Now Morgan and Dowling did the same. Morgan watched the Indians coming on their small ponies.

He said to Dowling, "Now I know what Crane was up to. He's been following us, all right, but not straight behind. Once he figured out the direction we were going, he must have scouted ahead and found this tongue of land. He'd have judged we'd come close to it, and he knew the Indians were still trailing.

"When he heard you spread the news about the water, he knew we were stopped, and he saw his chance. That's why he rode out of the dunes to the hard ground and then along it to here. He wanted the Indians to be sure and see him."

"Why?" Dowling asked almost stupidly. "Why would he want that?"

"So they'd attack us," Morgan said. He shifted his carbine. The Indians were almost within range by now. "Crane knows how they'll act if they win. They'll take the stock and scalps and everything they can haul away. But they won't bother with the wagons. Those would slow them down too much. Instead, they'll burn them—with our bodies inside. Then Crane can come back from wherever he's hiding and get the gold from what's left of Pardee's wagon.

"And it'll be all melted down to make it easier for him to carry."

"No, by God, he won't get away with it," Dowling whispered. "You take care of the Indians. I'm going after Crane. And this time I'm going to kill him."

XIX

THE INDIANS were almost to the sand now, riding in a ragged double file, the sun at their backs. They came on as if they knew how weak from lack of water the people of the train must be, and as if they expected little opposition.

Morgan whispered to the man next to him, "Hold your fire until I signal. Pass it on. If we do this right, we can cut them to pieces."

The word moved swiftly and softly down the line. Heads

nodded and grim faces remained turned toward the Indians. They were so close now that the warpaint could be clearly seen—and the modern guns.

They reached the sand, and now they were almost at the foot of the dune behind which Morgan and the others lay. When Morgan judged they were well into the sand and so slowed down, he cried, "Fire!" and sent his first bullet at the leading Comanche.

Seven other guns went off on Morgan's right, and then an eighth on his left. He jerked his head around to see Nora Fuller lying where Dowling had been, a carbine steady in her hand. Four Indians had fallen with the first fusillade and now they began to spread, yipping wildly. Morgan drew another bead and fired again, lifting a rider from his saddle and sending him scrabbling to the sand. Nora fired and a horse went down, pinning its rider.

The guns to Morgan's left were keeping up a ragged tempo now, and suddenly there were only five Indians still mounted. They turned and raced away, leaving nine men and three horses behind in the sand.

There was a shout from the west. Morgan turned to see Crane coming down into the hollow, his black stumbling in the deep sand. Dowling was close behind, forcing his horse to its limit.

Rolling to his feet, Morgan climbed aboard the smoke, and when Crane steered his blaze-faced black through the piles of sand and started up the far side of the slope, Morgan rode over and blocked him, gun drawn.

"Not this time, you don't run away," he said.

Crane drew up his horse and stared white-faced at Morgan. "I'm holding no gun," he said. "Do you or Abel aim to shoot me like this?"

"I don't aim to shoot you at all unless you try to get past me," Morgan said.

"What the devil do you want me to do?" Crane cried.

Morgan looked past him, at Abel Dowling. He had left his horse before it collapsed under him and he stood with his hands as empty as Crane's, his gun still in its holster.

"What happened back there?" Morgan demanded.

Dowling said, "He wouldn't draw. He knew I couldn't shoot him when he was empty-handed. Then he talked,

trying to get me to wait there with him until the Indians got rid of all of you—so we could take the gold together.”

“And then he’d kill you,” Morgan said. “But he’s still trying to keep from having your blood on his hands. He still wants me or someone else to do his killing for him.”

Crane said with an attempt at his old contempt, “The Indians will do it for me—if you don’t.”

“Which Indians?” Morgan asked softly. “The nine dead ones out there or the five that ran off like all Hades was on their tails?”

He saw Crane’s look of incredulity. He said, “You were so eager to get the Indians to kill us off for you that you reasoned the way they did—we’d be too weak to put up much of a fight. Or that we’d be caught by surprise. You didn’t think it through, Crane, or you’d have known differently. If we’d been that weak or that asleep, we’d never have gotten this far. When you’re dying, think about that—think about the last mistake you made and how big a one it was.”

“When I’m dying?” Crane echoed. “You’re going to shoot me, Morgan?”

“No, your brother is. Now you get off that horse and face him. Give him the chance he wants. You forced him into trying to kill you. You’re not stopping now.”

Dowling said thickly, “I’m waiting, Crane. You always did tell me when you were a kid and got a whipping that someday you’d be big enough to whip me back. All right, now’s your chance.”

Crane looked at Morgan and his mouth cocked up in his one-sided smile. “And then what after I kill him—with all these guns against me?”

“If you kill him fair and square, you ride away,” Morgan said.

Crane seemed to become motionless, as if he might be thinking about this, judging it for how much truth there was in it. Then, with no warning, he left the saddle, drawing his gun as he jumped.

He landed like a cat on his feet, facing Morgan. His handgun was ready and he fired, catching Morgan in the flesh of the upper arm, spinning him to his knees and sending his gun flying from his hand. Morgan lifted his head in time

to see Crane make another dancer's turn and end facing Abel Dowling.

It seemed to Morgan that Dowling had not had time to draw. But when Crane fired, Dowling's gun was in his hand and spitting. Dowling went backward after his one shot, legs flailing as he fell to the sand.

Morgan watched Crane, knowing he was wearing his grin, and wondering what he would do next. Crane still held his gun leveled and he took two steps toward his brother, who was trying weakly to stand. Then Crane's third step faltered. His knees buckled. And he went facedown in the torn-up sand.

Morgan got to his feet and went to Crane. Dowling managed to rise, and now Morgan could see where Crane's bullet had gouged through his shirt and furrowed along his ribs. Dowling staggered forward to stand beside Morgan.

Morgan turned Crane onto his back. The grin was still fixed on his face. His eyes were open and overly bright as he moved them from one man to the other.

"You learn too good, Abel," he whispered. "I didn't think you could draw that fast." He grimaced. "Even if I got you, it was because you let me. You gave me first shot and then hit me square in the middle. Right where it hurts most."

Morgan said to Dowling, "He's hit in the belly. It'll take him a little time to die. You'd better move him to where he can go in peace."

"Help me get him on his horse," Dowling said in a dead voice. "And somebody bring me a shovel. I won't come back until I've buried him."

Morgan found his arm useless and he sat back and watched as surprisingly gentle hands put Crane on his blaze-faced black and then helped Dowling into the saddle of Morgan's bay, his black clearly too beat to move any more. Someone thrust a shovel up at Dowling and he rode off, leading Crane sprawled on his own horse. They disappeared over the dune to the west.

Beside Morgan, Nora said, "Come into the wagon so I can dress your arm." And when they were in Pardee's wagon, she helped Morgan off with his shirt and studied the wound.

"Just through the flesh," she said. "You were lucky." Her

eyes probed into his. "Why didn't you shoot Crane before he shot you? I was watching. I know you could have."

"If I'd killed Crane, Abel would have shot me where I stood. And then he would have had to live with himself. I've learned a lot about him this past year. He isn't the kind of man who could live easy with all that on his mind."

"Can he—after killing Crane?"

"He's brought himself around to thinking of that the way he'd think of having to kill a pet dog that had gone mad," Morgan said. "Just as he's got himself thinking the same about me. Killing me for defending him against Crane wouldn't have been something he could have lived with very easy, but killing me now that Crane is dead, to Abel that's just a necessary duty."

"He plans to kill you and you—you sit here and talk about it as if it was inevitable!" she cried. "What are you going to do, run again? Or let him shoot you this time?"

He smiled up at her. "I haven't made up my mind yet. And I don't have to until we reach the river."

She almost twisted the bandage around his arm. "Men make me sick!" she cried, and started away.

"It wasn't much of a fight," Tim Boyle said in his cocky, boy's way. He grinned at Morgan. "When those Indians got caught in our fire, they must have thought the storm had come back and lightning had hit 'em."

They were riding alongside Pardee's wagon. Pardee said from the box, "It was a terrible slaughter. It makes me ill sometimes to think about it."

"It was no pleasure," Morgan agreed. "But when it comes down to that last choice, you or them, there's only one way to go."

He lifted a hand as they reached the top of a low rise and started down the gentle slope of the far side. "Hard ground ahead—and look beyond."

Pardee stared at the thin, hazy line in the distance. It was faintly green, the green of riverbank trees. "The Pecos?"

"The Pecos," Morgan agreed. "In half an hour we'll be out of the sand. And I say we push on if the horses can take it. We've got half a day ahead of us to travel and we can make the river by nightfall."

Pardee smiled at him and for the first time his voice held a tinge of humor in it. "I'll go right back and ask Kortner what he thinks," he said.

Morgan laughed and rode back to watch Nora's expression when she topped the rise and saw that the journey through the sands was finally ended. Then, he decided, he would ride ahead and scout out a good place to stop for the noonday meal.

This was their second daytime trek since they had started through the dunes. They had waited through the day and the next night for Dowling, but he hadn't come. Morgan had gone to look for him and had found him two valleys over, sitting by Crane's still body.

Morgan had said, "We're pulling out. I know the way now and we can make better time traveling in the daylight."

"Crane isn't dead yet," Dowling said without looking up. "You go on. I'll catch you. He won't last much longer."

"We'll leave food. You'd best take his canteens," Morgan said.

Dowling nodded and Morgan rode back to the camp. Now, as he was eating a plate of boiled beans and washing it down with fresh-made coffee, he looked back, wondering just how far behind them Dowling might be.

Nora said from beside him, "Are you thinking of going back to look for Mr. Dowling?"

Morgan glanced down at her. "You read my mind pretty well," he said. "If he doesn't show up before it's time to leave the river, I may have to go back."

"Why? So he'll get his chance to kill you?"

Morgan said gently, "Eat your dinner. We have a long way to go yet and supper's going to be late coming."

They ate supper by the light of a crackling fire. Not far off the sound of the river was comforting. Finished with his meal, Morgan rose and walked away from the others. He reached the bank of the river and stood in the shadow of a small tree, watching the moonlight on the shallow, softly flowing water.

"Did you come here to find out if I'd follow you?" Nora asked from near him.

He turned and found her in the darkness. "It was in my mind a little," he said.

"And I came to you. I'm as brazen as ever." She laughed and the laugh changed to a half sob as she pulled herself against him.

Morgan kissed her quietly and then eased her away from him. "You're crying?"

"Because I found you—and now I'm going to lose you!"

"We don't know that," Morgan said. "For now, let's say it's enough that you came to me. Let's—"

He broke off as Tim Boyle's voice whooped in sudden excitement. "Rider coming. It's Mr. Dowling."

And Mrs. Zale called comfortably, "You're just in time to clean up the last of the supper, Mr. Dowling."

Nora was clinging to Morgan's good arm. He moved her fingers away. "You wait here," he said.

"For how long?" she demanded.

"Not long," he assured her. "I'll be back." He touched her waiting lips with his. "This time, I'll come to you."

He walked away from the river to the camp. He stepped into the firelight and looked for Dowling. He had taken a plate of food and a mug of coffee and was standing alone in shadow by Pardee's wagon. The others, respecting his indrawn silence, were carefully letting him alone. Mrs. Boyle made a reproving noise as Morgan walked past her and up to Dowling.

"It's all over?"

Dowling said, "I shot his horse and buried it with him. He always cottoned to blaze-faced blacks since he was a kid in rompers."

Morgan said quietly, "Our job is done. These people will be safe enough from here on. There'll be Cavalry anywhere there's a dangerous stretch of road."

"You're leaving them, then?" Dowling asked.

"I don't know," Morgan said. "That depends on you."

"I figured on staying with them as far as El Paso and then turning north. It's about time I got back to the ranch," Dowling said.

Morgan nodded. "Crane told you the whole story before he finally died?"

"Yes," Dowling said. "At least he had enough of a conscience not to want to die with his lies on his soul."

There was no need to say more. Morgan turned and walked

away, back to the river. Nora stood where he had left her, and when he put his hands on her shoulders, she lifted her face and whispered, "Morgan?"

"It's all right. Crane told him the way it really was—as I thought he would. Abel's lost his need for killing me now."

She cried a little and then laughed softly. "Is that why you sent them off that way to be alone?"

"Partly. I did it some for Abel, and some for myself," Morgan admitted.

She laughed again. "You can be too clever," she murmured. "That's something a woman has to watch in a husband."