

COLORADO
COWBOYS

2

THE HEART OF A COWBOY

JODY HEDLUND



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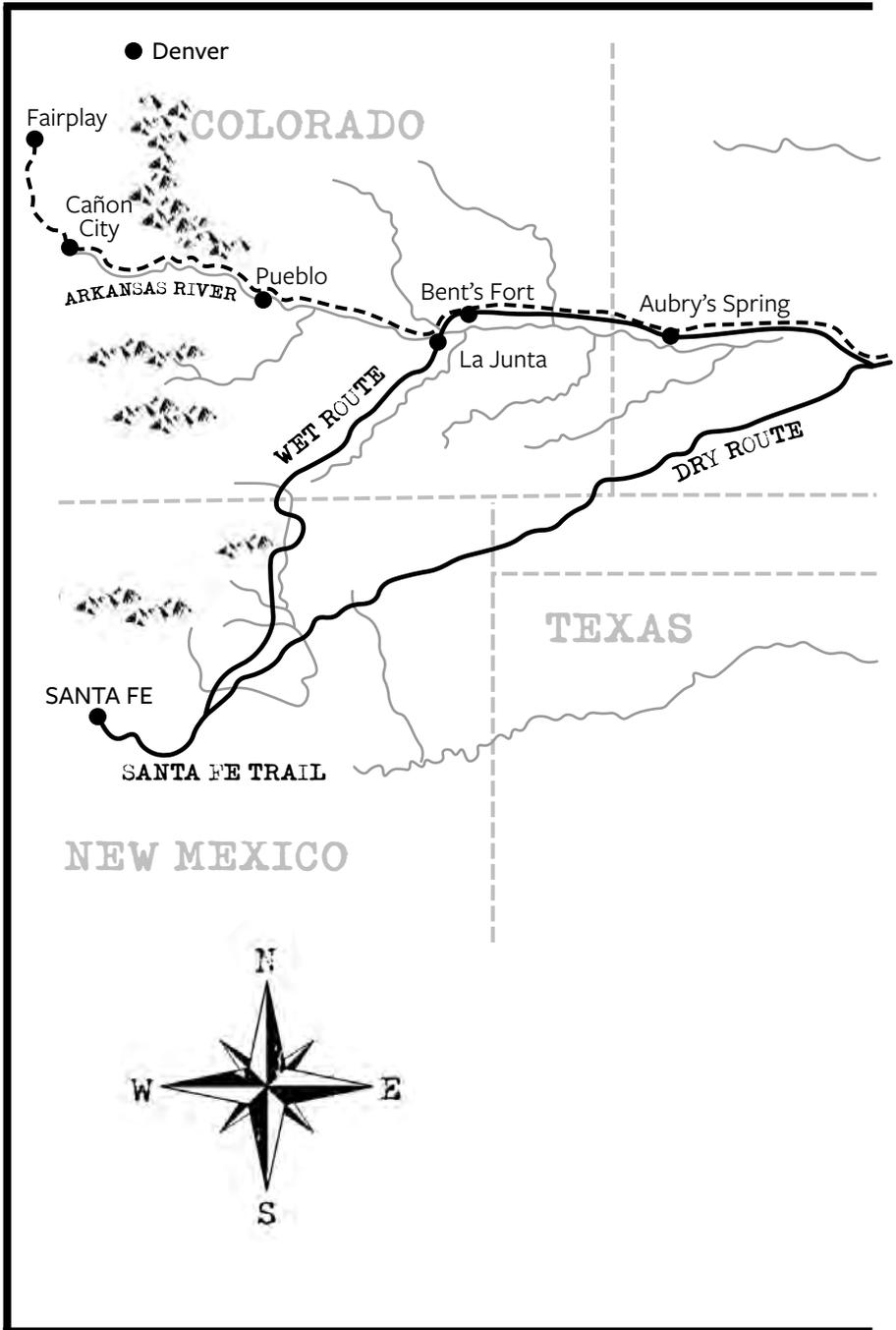
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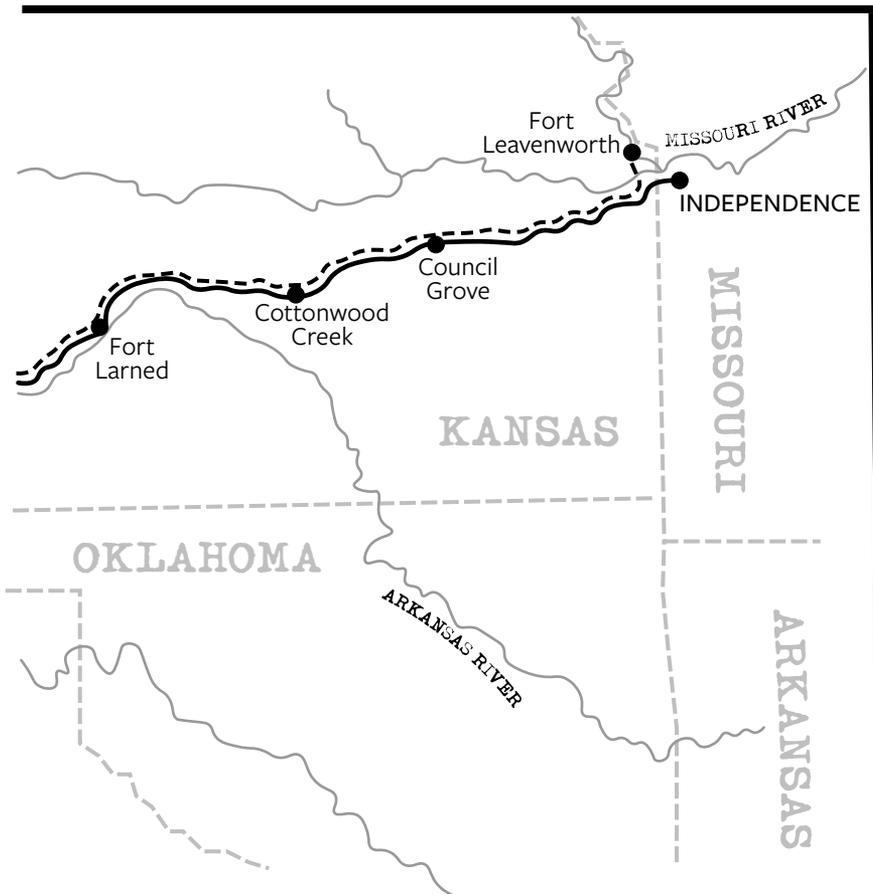


Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which
to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not
much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?

Matthew 6:30







THE SANTA FE TRAIL

A decorative flourish with symmetrical scrollwork and a central floral motif, framing the chapter title.

CHAPTER

1

COUNCIL GROVE, KANSAS
MAY 1863

She was going to drown.

The Neosho River wrapped its cold fingers around Linnea Newberry and pulled her down. Frantically she fought the raging current. But muddy water rushed against her face, filling her mouth and nose, making it impossible to breathe.

Above the roaring water, shouts and calls trailed after her. Her grandfather's anxious voice was the loudest of them all.

She tried to kick and propel herself toward the riverbank, but her heavy muslin skirt, combined with her petticoat and bloomers underneath, tangled around her legs and trapped her like manacles.

For a second the water tossed her high, giving her a glimpse of the back of the covered wagon where she'd perched moments ago. She'd been in the process of analyzing the southern cattail *Typha domingensis* she'd plucked

from a swampy pond that morning. In the next instant, the wheels rolled over a stone in the riverbed, and the jarring threw her overboard.

Now the Neosho, swift and swollen with spring rains, dragged her low. Choking for breath, she clawed at the air, at the water, at anything to keep from going under. As she passed a fallen cottonwood dangling above the surface, she reached for it and her fingers connected with a rough branch.

God, help me. Fear and panic mingled in her chest.

“Hold on tight!” shouted a rider, directing a sorrel horse her way. The river pounded against the steed’s flank, threatening to sweep both man and beast away. But somehow the horse plunged toward her, defying the river’s greedy grasp.

Her wet hand slipped down the branch. Her fingers ached in her desperate attempt to hold on. With her hair drenched, muddy water dribbled into her eyes, down her nose, and over her lips. And a splash from the approaching horse hit her in the face.

Blinking hard, she spluttered.

The rider lunged for her, his gloved hands wrapping around her forearm.

She grabbed on to his stirrup, and as he began to tug her out of the water, she clutched at his saddle to aid in her upward climb. He lifted her with surprising strength, towing her up until he had her by both arms. Then with a final haul, he hoisted her into the saddle in front of him.

She coughed and swiped at the water still trickling down her face. Before she could speak or even glimpse her rescuer, he was angling his horse toward the western bank. Linnea held her breath and clung to the pommel, praying the crea-

ture would stay steady upon its feet and wouldn't be knocked downriver, taking them with it.

The rushing water drowned out all other sounds except the labored breathing of the man behind her. His arms were tense on either side of her, the reins wrapped around his hands. He hunkered low, leaning into her. The muscles in his chest rippled with his effort at controlling and directing his steed.

When the horse began to climb upward into shallower water, Linnea allowed herself to breathe again. *Thank you, heavenly Father, for saving my life.*

She'd known the journey west would be fraught with difficulties and danger. In all the preparations for their botanical expedition, her grandfather had read tale after tale of death and injury that befell so many who attempted the overland crossing. He cautioned her regarding the perils and warned her against going.

Nevertheless, she hadn't expected to face death after only ten days on the Santa Fe Trail.

The horse stumbled on loose stones and thick silt. The movement jarred Linnea, tilting her to one side. Her rescuer was boxing her in, keeping her from sliding off. Even so, she grasped his arm.

At the same time, the rider patted his horse's mane and neck, as though to encourage it. The horse steadied itself and continued plodding uphill.

The sloping dirt embankment gave way to the rolling blue-stem hills with cordgrass in the low, wet areas comprised of buttonbush, eastern grama grass, and common ironweed. Burr oak, black walnut, hackberry, green ash, and cottonwood trees converged along the banks, providing shade to groups of travelers who'd already made the crossing.

“Flynn!” called a girl hopping up and down at the top of the embankment under the shady branches of a sprawling cottonwood thick with new foliage. “Howdy-dooty! You did it! You saved her!”

A gangly young man of about sixteen years slid down the dirt and gravel toward them. He reached for the horse’s muzzle. “Mighty fine job, Flynn. Couldn’t have done much better myself.”

The man behind Linnea—apparently named Flynn—gave a final nudge of his heels to the horse’s flanks. The creature crested the bank, revealing the river bottoms where dozens upon dozens of cattle grazed on the grama grass, some in the shade of the deciduous hardwoods, others sunning themselves and swishing their tails against the flies.

Two other young men stood on the bank watching, having abandoned their nearby blazing campfire and an iron skillet still sizzling with frying fish.

“You sure got in there fast, Flynn.” The girl bounded toward them, her dark hair hanging in unruly waves about her dirt-smudged face, her brown eyes shining with admiration. Although slender, her body showed the first signs of developing into a woman, especially because her calico dress was much too tight and short—as if she’d long outgrown it. If Linnea had to take a guess, she put the girl at twelve or thirteen years old.

“Grab a blanket to warm her,” Flynn said to the girl.

She shifted her attention, staring openly at Linnea. Only as Linnea tried to formulate a smile did she realize how badly her teeth were chattering and her body shaking. After the initial shock of falling into the river, she’d been so fo-

cused on surviving that she hadn't paid attention to how cold she was.

But now she was aware of the numbness of her fingers and toes. Her clothing stuck to her body like an icy layer of morning frost. Frigid water ran down her arms and legs.

"Go on, Ivy." The rider spoke again, this time more sharply. "And Dylan, you stoke the fire."

The girl gave a quick nod, then scampered away. And the young man hurried off to do Flynn's bidding as well.

Were they his children? If so, where was his wife? Linnea could see no evidence of other women around his camp.

"Hang on." The man's voice rumbled near her ear. He shifted, and the warm pressure of his body and arms moved away from her, leaving her exposed to the midmorning air.

It had been warm enough when they'd started out at dawn. It had been warm enough when she'd explored the marshland around a pond they'd passed. And it had been plenty warm when they'd been in the long line of wagons waiting to make the river crossing.

But at present, a chill settled deep inside, and she hugged herself for warmth.

Flynn slid from the horse. Once standing, he peered up at her, giving her a glimpse of his face for the first time. Though he wore the brim of his felt hat low, there was no hiding the handsome features—lean cheeks tapering into a muscular jaw, a firm mouth, and a well-defined chin. A layer of dark facial scruff lent him a shadowed, almost wounded appeal. If that wasn't enough, his eyes were a bright green-blue, the color of bluegrass.

Since he'd taken charge of the children, she expected someone older, a middle-aged father. But this man, though

he was well-built and filled out to the fullest, couldn't be many years past her own twenty-one.

He was scrutinizing her with the same carefulness, his brows rising as if she surprised him every bit as much as he did her. She was a mess and guessed she looked worse than a wet cat. In her flailing, her hair had come loose from its chignon and hung in tangled curly masses over her shoulders and halfway down to her waist. Even wet, the bright red was as noticeable as always.

She craned her neck to see upriver. Amidst the long caravan crossing at the river's shallowest place, she spotted their team of oxen straining to pull their wagon up the gradual incline, following the other scientists in the expedition who were riding their horses. Her grandfather sat on the wagon bench next to Clay, his manservant, and waved both arms at her.

Starting from New York City, their six-member team had traveled for weeks, first by train and then by steamboat, before they reached Fort Leavenworth in March. They'd initially planned to traverse the Santa Fe Trail starting from Independence, Missouri, but with border ruffians stirring up strife, they'd had to change their plans to avoid some of the danger.

What would Grandfather say now that she'd almost drowned? Would he force her to return home?

"Ma'am?" Her rescuer was still staring up at her. "You alright?"

She forced her lips into a smile but still couldn't control the chattering of her teeth. "Yes. Thank you."

"Let's get you warmed up." His gloved hands closed about her waist, and he lifted her down.

As her feet touched the ground, her legs buckled.

“Whoa now.” Flynn didn’t release her.

“I think I’m just a little cold and worn out.” She tried to make her muscles obey a silent command to work, but she collapsed again, this time grabbing fistfuls of Flynn’s vest to keep herself from falling.

In an instant, he swooped her up into his arms and started toward the fire Dylan was feeding with handfuls of brush and twigs. She ought to protest a strange man carrying her so boldly, especially because he walked with a limp, clearly suffering himself. But his determined stride—along with the fact that he’d just rescued her from the brink of death—told her this man had the makings of a hero and she had nothing to fear from him.

Ivy was hanging halfway out the back of a covered wagon, her too-short skirt revealing bare feet that were black on the bottom. She hopped down, a quilt in her arms, and sped toward Linnea and Flynn.

“Found this real nice quilt Ma made.” The girl held it out, but Flynn didn’t stop until he reached the fire.

He gently lowered Linnea to a log that had been smoothed and shaped, likely by all the previous travelers who’d rested there after crossing the river. Then he took the quilt from Ivy and draped it about Linnea’s shoulders.

“There you are.” He straightened, his brows furrowed. “That oughta do it. You’ll be warm in no time now.”

She held her hands out toward the flames, letting the warmth bathe her. “Oh, yes. I’m already feeling better.”

Ivy plopped down on the log next to Linnea. “You’re real lucky Flynn got you when he did.”

“I agree.” Linnea smiled up at Flynn again. He towered

above her as though he wanted to help her further but wasn't sure what to do. "I owe you my life. I don't know how I can ever thank you."

"No thanks needed, ma'am—"

"Linnea. Please call me Linnea."

He hesitated, probably unaccustomed to such informality and boldness from a woman. Most men were. Most were also unaccustomed to her bloomers, her college education, and her scientific work as a botanist. Usually once she explained that her mother was a leader of the fledgling suffragist movement, they began to make sense of her unconventional ways. In actuality, her mother and older sister were much more liberal than Linnea was, at times proposing wild ideologies that made her blush.

"Li-nay-uh?" Ivy tucked the blanket more securely over Linnea's legs. "That's sure a strange name."

Flynn shot the girl a glare. "Ivy, mind your manners."

Linnea chuckled. "Please, don't worry. My name is unusual, and I'm quite familiar with having to explain it."

Dylan paused in adding brush to the fire. "Mighty pretty if I do say so myself. Just like you."

"Dy-lan." Flynn ground out the word.

The youth shared a family resemblance to Flynn and was on track to turn into a man just as handsome—if not more so—than his brother. He ignored Flynn's rebuke and winked at Linnea with a carefree grin.

"My grandfather is named Linnus, and so was my father." She glanced in the direction of her traveling companions. Her grandfather was in the process of descending from the wagon now parked a short distance out of the way of other travelers. She needed to be as warm and normal as possible

when he reached her, so she could prove to him that her tumble into the river was nothing to worry about.

She bent in closer to the flames and rubbed her hands together. “My grandfather and father both were hoping for a boy to carry on the family name. But upon my birth as a girl, they decided the only thing to be done was call me Linnea.”

Ivy cocked her head. “They didn’t want to wait for a boy to come along next?”

“My mother would have been content with only one child—my older sister. But since my father wanted a son, she conceded to having two children.”

“Well, that’s sure strange. Didn’t know a woman could control babies coming along.”

Dylan snorted.

“Hush up, Ivy.” Flynn tipped the brim of his hat lower and poked at the fire, sending sparks into the air.

“What?” Ivy’s eyes rounded with innocence. “I always figured babies had a way of coming whether a woman wanted another or not. Leastways that’s the way it was with Ma.”

Flynn pressed his lips together and shook his head. The subject of having babies was clearly one he didn’t feel comfortable discussing so publicly. However, Linnea was used to her mother’s frank conversations regarding reproduction, babies, and birthing. In fact, there weren’t many topics her mother considered vulgar. And although Linnea was perfectly at ease discussing methods of preventing conception, she wasn’t in the practice of doing so with people she’d just met, particularly with a young girl Ivy’s age.

“My ma just kept popping out the babies.” Apparently,

Ivy had no qualms about continuing the discussion. “She had four boys, then me. After my pa died and she married Rusty, she kept having stillbirths until the last one killed her.”

“Ivy! That’s enough.” Flynn’s tone turned harsh. “Hush your mouth before I give you a whupping.”

Ivy jumped to her feet and flounced her hair over her shoulders. “Twelve-year-olds don’t get whuppin’s no more.”

Flynn faced off with the girl, their gazes locked, their hands fisted, their expressions taut. This obviously wasn’t their first conflict. In fact, they were like lit powder kegs about to explode.

Linnea pushed up from the log and stepped between the two. “I don’t know about you, but I could sure use a cup of hot coffee to warm up. That is, if you have extra to spare.” A coffeepot sat beside the pan of fish in the grass next to the fire.

Flynn held Ivy’s gaze a moment longer, then shifted it to Linnea. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes spoke of worry more than anger. She guessed he was one of the older brothers Ivy had spoken about, trying to take care of his younger siblings now that his parents were gone.

Linnea could imagine how difficult it was to parent a sibling, much less a girl like Ivy on the cusp of womanhood.

“Of course we have coffee to spare.” Dylan was already reaching for the pot. He sloshed the container as though judging how much was left, and then he picked up a discarded tin mug from the grass, tipped out the black sludge, and poured from the pot.

The mixture going into the mug looked thick enough to be mud and thankfully tapered to a trickle before it reached halfway. He handed her the cup. “Here you go, darlin’.”

She tried not to think about the mouths that had already touched the mug, or the decidedly cold tin against her hands. Before she lost courage, she lifted the cup, took a mouthful, and swallowed—all in one motion.

It was just as cold and bitter and awful as she'd anticipated, but she suppressed a shudder. "Thank you. You're so very kind."

Dylan's grin spread. "If you're hungry, we got some fish all fried up too. Caught it myself."

She didn't dare glance at the pan lest this time her shudder broke loose. "I appreciate the offer, but I'll start with the coffee for now."

The group they were traveling with consisted of a dozen wagons and usually stopped later in the morning for a break. That's when they ate their first meal of the day since at dawn they were too busy packing up and readying to leave. She'd heard most caravans followed that pattern and often rested for a couple of hours at midday to avoid exerting themselves during the hottest part of the day, allowing the livestock a chance to graze.

Even now, their caravan was due for a break. As the final wagon rolled up the bank, she guessed their guide would lead the group to a spot of shade in the river valley somewhere close by. Nonetheless, her grandfather was winding past the other camps and drawing near.

"Grandfather." She waved as enthusiastically as she could muster. "I'm just fine."

Attired in a crisp morning coat, bow tie, and his tall stove-pipe hat, he had a distinguished air about him. His monocle hung from a chain attached to his vest and swung like a pendulum with each of his long strides. His hair—once a bright

crimson like hers—was now a soft reddish blond, slowly turning gray.

“Linnea!” A deep frown creased his face. “Are you alright?”

“Just a little wet.” She straightened her shoulders, thankful she’d stopped shaking from the cold even if her feet were still numb.

Unfortunately she’d inherited her father’s distractibility, often getting too focused on one thing to pay attention to what was going on around her. Grandfather worried she’d suffer an accident and meet her end the same way her father had.

It didn’t help that Grandfather also considered her more fragile simply because she was a woman. At five foot five inches, she had her mother’s thin, delicate features, making her appear dainty even though she was strong and robust—something she’d mentioned continually when she pleaded her case for taking part in the expedition. Even so, since Linnea was the first woman to be part of an exploratory trip like this, Grandfather assumed she wouldn’t have the same stamina and strength as the men.

By now she hoped she was beginning to prove that her contribution to the expedition was valuable enough to outweigh the risks, especially because she was working harder than all the other scientists to catalog the flora on their journey.

Grandfather drew her into an embrace. He held her tightly, long enough that she could feel the quavering in his limbs. “I was so distressed.”

She couldn’t tell him she’d been distressed too. She needed to remain strong. Such was the curse of a woman, having to project an image of strength she didn’t always feel. But she’d

learned the hard way that showing weakness only made men question her abilities even more.

When Grandfather pulled back, he fitted his monocle into his eye socket, took hold of both her arms, and scrutinized her as he did his plant specimens.

She laughed and tugged away. “You needn’t worry, Grandfather. I’m not a flower petal. I won’t wilt.”

“I know that, dear. But you could have drowned—”

“I didn’t. And I’m perfectly fine.”

Her grandfather studied her a moment longer, then sighed before holding out a hand toward Flynn. “Young man, thank you for saving my granddaughter. I cannot begin to express my gratitude.”

Flynn shook his hand. “No thanks necessary, sir.”

Linnea hadn’t been properly introduced to these people herself, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t make introductions. “Grandfather, this is Flynn . . .” Except she didn’t know his last name.

At her pause, he spoke. “McQuaid. The name’s Flynn McQuaid.”

Grandfather tilted his head and examined Flynn through his monocle. “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. McQuaid. I’m Dr. Howell. And you’ve met my granddaughter, Mrs. Asa Newberry.”

Ivy, who had been staring at Linnea during the entire reunion with her grandfather, released a low whistle. “Holy Saint Peter. You’re awfully young to be married.”

Flynn’s shoulders stiffened at Ivy’s bold statement. Before he could rebuke the precocious girl, Linnea waved off the comment. “I’m twenty-one years old. So I’m not terribly young, am I?”

THE HEART OF A COWBOY

“Where’s your husband?” Ivy glanced around. “Why didn’t he rescue you? Reckon as sweet as you are, he woulda jumped in right after you.”

A strange heaviness settled on her chest. “I imagine he would have jumped in after me if he’d been along. But he’s not here . . . because he’s dead.”