

CIMARRON CREEK
TRILOGY • 1



AMANDA
CABOT


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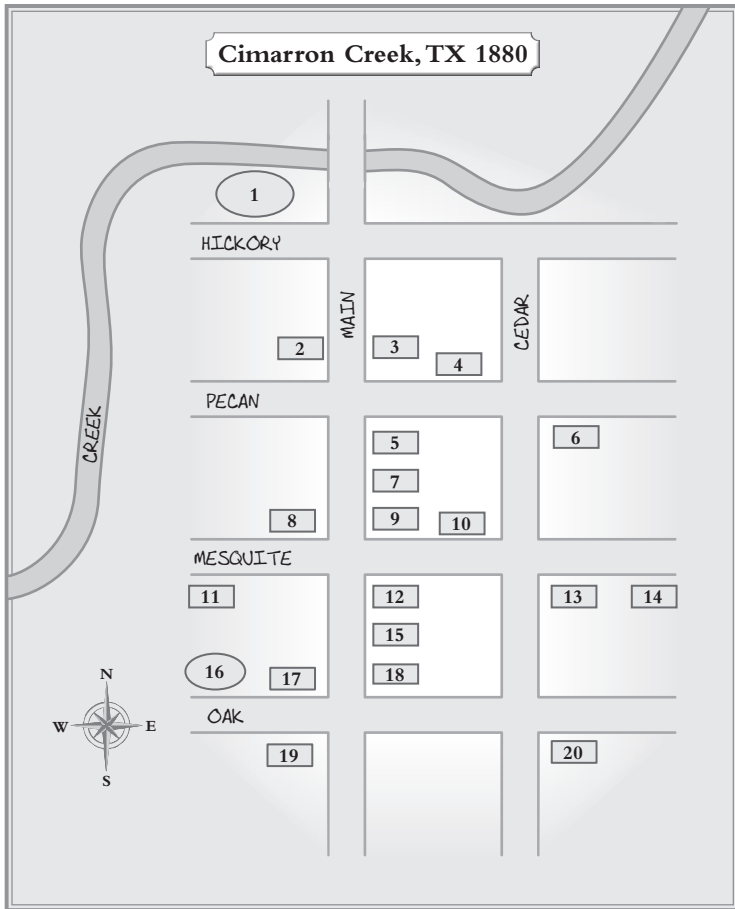
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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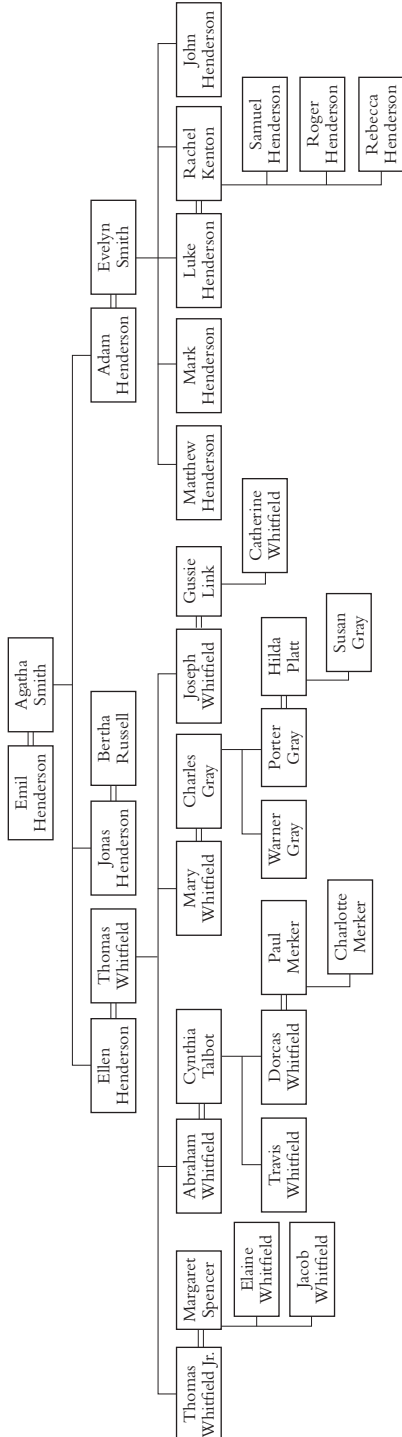
For Virginia Chapman, former classmate, friend,
and prayer warrior *extraordinaire*. Ginny, I'm so
glad you took the time to reconnect with me. It's
wonderful having you back in my life.





- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 – Town park | 12 – Sheriff’s office and jail |
| 2 – Silver Spur saloon | 13 – Jacob Whitfield’s home
(a Founder’s house) |
| 3 – Livery stable | 14 – Charles, Mary, and Warner Gray’s
home |
| 4 – Porter and Hilda’s home | 15 – Mayor’s office/ post office |
| 5 – Mercantile | 16 – Cemetery |
| 6 – Aunt Bertha’s home
(a Founder’s house) | 17 – Church |
| 7 – Apothecary | 18 – Cimarron Sweets |
| 8 – Doc Harrington’s home and office | 19 – School |
| 9 – Dressmaker’s shop | 20 – Matthew Henderson’s home
(a Founder’s house) |
| 10 – Travis’s home | |
| 11 – Catherine’s home | |

CIMARRON CREEK FOUNDING FAMILIES





MAY 1880

No matter what anyone said, she wouldn't believe this was a mistake. Lydia Crawford glanced at the other passengers, wondering whether her hours of sitting here, remaining silent but keeping a smile firmly fixed on her face, had done anything to lessen their hostility. She had considered pulling a book from her bag and spending the day lost in one of Jane Austen's tales but had feared that would only rile her companions more.

Though Lydia wanted nothing beyond a peaceful journey and some pleasant conversation, she suspected that was impossible. The two sisters who were traveling together and the mother and son had given her friendly smiles when they'd boarded the stagecoach in Dallas, but the moment she'd opened her mouth, those smiles had turned to frowns, the friendliness to hostility.

"She's a Yankee," one of the sisters had announced. "Mebbe a sister to one of them carpetbaggers. She's sure makin' a mistake coming to Texas." They both glared at Lydia for a moment, then turned away, refusing to even look in her direction.

The mother had taken more drastic action. Though she and her son had chosen seats next to Lydia when they boarded the stagecoach, once Lydia had spoken and they'd realized she was

a Northerner, they'd moved to the less comfortable backless bench in the center of the coach rather than risk being tainted by her presence.

Lydia had endured snubs before, but none of this magnitude. Though she'd tried to slough it off, she'd been unable. Not only had the woman's shunning hurt but it made Lydia wonder if she would face similar rejection in Cimarron Creek. *Nonsense*, she told herself. *Edgar would have warned me if that were the case.* But of course there had been no word from Edgar. The night he left, they had both agreed it would be far too risky for him to send a letter or telegram. He would go to Texas and make a home for them, leaving Lydia to join him as soon as the school could find a replacement for her. Though it wasn't their original plan, it was the only one that made sense after what had happened outside the tavern. Surely it wasn't a mistake.

Lydia's gaze moved past the disapproving sisters to the dark-haired boy in the center of the coach. With little else to occupy him, he'd been staring at her. Now he leaned forward, his hand extended as if he wanted to touch her. Lydia shook her head slightly, knowing nothing good would come from encouraging the child. A second later, though his mother had been gazing out the window, seemingly oblivious to the curious looks her son had been giving Lydia, she turned abruptly and yanked him back onto the bench.

"Silas, you stay right here. I don't want you talkin' to that person." She spat the final word as if it were an epithet. Lydia refused to cringe. She'd been called worse, especially once she'd crossed the Mason-Dixon line. Though the war had been over for more than fifteen years, the enmity caused by four years of bloodshed and the disastrous era known as Reconstruction remained, at least in some hearts.

"But, Ma," the boy protested, "she's real purty. I nebber seen hair like that."

This time Lydia did cringe, wishing she'd been Silas's teacher.

The boy was clearly old enough to attend school, but his poor grammar told her that if he was being taught, it wasn't well.

Silas's mother continued to frown. "You do as I say, young man, or I'll tan your hide."

"Yes, Ma." But, despite his mother's admonitions, Silas smiled at Lydia.

"Silas!"

He looked up at his mother, his expression one of feigned innocence. "I ain't talkin'."

Though Lydia was tempted to grin at the boy's cheeky response, she didn't want to get him in any more trouble, and so she turned to look out the window. At least the scenery would not protest a Northerner's gaze.

Texas bore little resemblance to central New York. It wasn't simply the heat, although that was far more intense than she had expected, especially since summer hadn't officially begun. The towns she'd passed through were smaller than the ones near Syracuse, with few of the two-story houses so common at home.

Lydia hadn't been able to identify many of the crops, and the trees—she'd heard someone call them pecans and live oaks—were unlike the elms, maples, and sycamores that lined the streets in Syracuse. The grass was different too, and though she hadn't thought it possible, the Texas sky seemed even deeper blue than a summer sky at home.

Lydia shook herself mentally. Syracuse wasn't home any longer. Her family was gone, and she'd resigned her position at the academy where she'd spent most of her life, first as a student, then as a teacher. With her ties to central New York severed, there was nothing to return to. Her future home was with Edgar in Cimarron Creek, Texas. Thank goodness that was only a few hours away. She was equally thankful that none of the other passengers would be disembarking there. Surely the residents of Cimarron Creek would be more welcoming.

She leaned against the seat back and closed her eyes, not

wanting to see the unfriendly faces opposite her. The journey that had been long and at times grueling was almost over. Before the sun set, Lydia would be with Edgar. By the end of the week, she would be Mrs. Edgar Ellis. It might be four months later than they'd planned, but soon—very soon—she would be wearing the beautiful ring he'd shown her their last evening together. Lydia bit the inside of her cheek, remembering how the ring had gleamed in the moonlight when he'd held it in his bloodstained hands.

Stop it! she admonished herself. She had resolved not to think about that night and the reason Edgar had fled. When the police had questioned her, she had been able to answer honestly that he hadn't told her where he was headed. But even though no names had been mentioned that night, she'd known his destination. Months earlier, Edgar had shown her a map of Texas and had pointed toward the town where he wanted them to raise a family.

"It's right in the heart of what they call the Hill Country," he said. "Germans settled a lot of towns, but this one was founded by three men from the North."

Edgar's enthusiasm had been contagious, and Lydia soon found herself imagining their life in a new state.

"It'll be warm and beautiful," he told her. "Best of all, we'll be able to open our own business. No more working for others."

Independence had always been Edgar's dream, though the details seemed to change with the phases of the moon. One day he wanted to run a mercantile. A week later he would talk about buying a hotel and restaurant. The one thing they'd both agreed on was that a saloon had no place in their future.

Lydia had soon realized that all that truly mattered to Edgar was being his own boss, and she'd accepted the vague explanations. It didn't matter to her whether they ran a mercantile, a hotel, or something else. What mattered was being with Edgar.

Soon. She opened her eyes again and gazed at the landscape.

The bluebonnets she'd heard so much about were no longer blooming, but other wildflowers dotted the grass, and the flat terrain had turned to gently rolling hills. Lydia sighed with pleasure. Texas was beautiful, a place where dreams could come true, where promises would be fulfilled. She'd been right to ignore the advice one well-meaning woman had given her. There was no reason to turn back. In a few hours she would be with Edgar and all her questions would be answered.

It was not a mistake.



Trouble was coming. Travis Whitfield could feel it in the air as he strode toward the mercantile. The stagecoach was due in ten minutes. As it did each weekday, it would bring mail. Today it would also bring Travis's father, the source of the impending trouble.

Travis tried not to frown, but the fact was, with Pa in Austin, this last month had been more peaceful than any he could recall since the town had asked him to wear the sheriff's badge. Wasn't that a sad commentary? Though he wasn't satisfied with Doc's verdict that Sheriff Allen's death had been an accident and though a man had gone missing, Travis was calling it a peaceful month.

The peace was about to end. Dorcas's latest letter had warned him that not even the sight of his first grandchild had mellowed Pa's temper. He was still telling anyone who'd listen—and even those who wouldn't—that his son had no business accepting the appointment as Cimarron Creek's sheriff when he was already serving the town as a lawyer. Never mind that Travis was doing both. Once Pa stepped off the stagecoach, he'd start haranguing him again.

Tipping his hat to a woman whose overflowing bag indicated she'd found several garments to her liking at the dressmaker's shop, Travis had to admit there were days when he agreed with

Pa. He'd known being sheriff wouldn't be easy, but it had proven to be more difficult than he'd expected. For a town of barely a hundred and sixty, Cimarron Creek seemed to have more than its share of problems.

Travis looked down the street. Perhaps he was prejudiced, but he believed his grandfather and great-uncles had chosen wisely when they'd laid out the town. They'd insisted that trees be cut only if absolutely necessary, with the result that the stores on Main Street were shaded by live oaks. He'd seen other towns where residents had to contend with the blazing sun, and the sheriffs of those towns had admitted that tempers frequently flared when the mercury rose.

Travis couldn't blame heat for the latest problem. It hadn't been hot the night the town's newest resident had disappeared. There hadn't even been a full moon. Some folks—his own father among them—claimed mischief was more likely when the moon was full. That hadn't been the case last week. No heat, no moon, just one missing man.

Opal Ellis wasn't going to be happy that Travis had nothing new to report, but it wasn't for lack of trying. When his own search had turned up no clues to the whereabouts of Opal's missing husband, Travis had sent telegrams to the sheriffs of all the surrounding towns. They'd had no more success than he had.

“Howdy, Sheriff.”

Travis nodded at the trio of schoolboys lounging against the one empty store on Main Street. With school over for the summer and crops not ready for harvest, they had little to occupy their time. Fortunately, they hadn't gotten into trouble. Not yet. But they would. Remembering his own boyhood shenanigans, Travis knew that was inevitable. He only hoped the antics wouldn't be too serious and that no one would ask him to intervene. He had enough work already, with the missing Edgar Ellis on top of his list.

Travis didn't like unsolved mysteries. That was the reason he'd asked for his cousins' opinions. The three of them had been playing horseshoes in Porter's yard when he'd brought up the subject. As he'd expected, neither man was reticent about expressing his beliefs. What he hadn't expected was that the men who were as close to him as brothers had disagreed.

Porter claimed Edgar had left town of his own volition once he'd learned he was going to be a father.

"Babies are a lot of work," he declared. "I ought to know." As the youngest of what some townspeople called the Three Musketeers but the only one who was married and had a child, Porter liked to boast about his status.

Wrinkling his nose as if he were tired of listening to his brother's tales of fatherhood, Warner disagreed with Porter's assessment. Instead, he speculated Edgar had been run out of town—or worse—by someone still fighting the war. If Pa had been in Cimarron Creek at the time, he might have been Warner's primary suspect, but Pa was in Austin, making Dorcas's life miserable.

Though he'd done everything he could, Travis had no idea where Opal's husband had gone. As much as he wished it were otherwise, that was one mystery he was unlikely to solve today or anytime soon.

As he approached the drugstore, Travis pulled his watch from his pocket and nodded. He'd left too early. Since there was no point in standing in front of the mercantile simply waiting for the coach to arrive, he might as well see what Warner was doing this afternoon. Travis pushed open the door and inhaled the pungent smells of the county's only pharmacy.

On the opposite side of the store, his cousin glanced up from whatever he was grinding with his mortar and pestle. As tall as Travis but with hair a lighter shade of brown and eyes that were blue rather than gray, Warner had the firm jaw they'd both inherited from their great-grandfather.

“You don’t look too happy,” he said.

“Pa’s due in with today’s mail. Would you be happy if you were in my boots?”

Warner shook his head. “I can’t say that I would, but my own boots are feeling mighty uncomfortable today.”

Though Travis had hoped for a bit of sympathy, it appeared he’d be the one dispensing it. “Someone didn’t like the potion you made for them?”

As Travis had intended, Warner rose to the bait. The town’s first pharmacist was proud of his training and insistent that he be treated with the proper degree of respect. He was not, he had informed both his brother and Travis, a pill peddler.

“How many times do I have to tell you they’re not called potions? That sounds like something a witch brews. I concoct medicines.”

Travis looked around his cousin’s obviously prosperous business. Tall glass-fronted cabinets filled with bottles in every size, shape, and color lined the back wall. Many of the bottles were patent medicines Warner purchased ready-made, but others were created right here using formulas Warner had learned during his years of training in Philadelphia.

Raising his hands in mock surrender, Travis conceded his cousin’s point. “All right. Let me rephrase my question. Did someone not like the medicine you concocted for them?”

“I wish that was the problem. I could deal with that.” Warner continued grinding whatever it was into a floury powder. “You’re not the only one with parent problems. My father stopped by to remind me it’s time for me to do my duty. I’m expected to marry and produce grandchildren, preferably boys since Porter has already presented Ma and Pa with a granddaughter.”

Though his own father had similar sentiments and wasn’t shy about voicing them, this was the first time Travis had heard that his uncle was pressuring Warner. “What does he expect you to do—send for a mail-order bride?”

Warner shrugged. “That idea was mentioned. I don’t think he cares how I find a bride so long as I do. The gist of the speech he gave me was that as the firstborn it’s my responsibility to ensure that the Gray name is carried on.” Warner poured the finely ground substance into a small glass bottle and capped it. “You know as well as I do how unpleasant Pa can be when he’s riled, so if you happen to see a beautiful single woman walking the streets of Cimarron Creek, send her my way. I’ll make her an offer she won’t refuse.”

Though Warner sounded serious, he wagged his eyebrows and pretended to twirl the ends of a nonexistent moustache. Travis began to laugh. “Thanks, cousin. I needed a good laugh.”

Travis was still chuckling at Warner’s parody of a melodrama villain while he waited for the stagecoach. The arrival of a single woman, much less a beautiful one, was as unlikely as Pa suddenly regrowing the leg he had lost at Gettysburg, and Warner knew it. Still, his cousin had joked instead of ranting about his father’s demands.

Perhaps that was something Travis ought to do. The problem was, joking didn’t come easily to him. Even before he’d assumed the sheriff’s badge, Aunt Bertha had told him he took life too seriously. He couldn’t argue with that. Life was serious, and it had become more so after his mother’s death five years earlier. Since then, Aunt Bertha had done her best to cheer him. Lately, though, she’d been so caught up in whatever was troubling her that she hadn’t chided Travis, and he found he missed the gentle yet firm advice she used to dole out.

Travis’s smile faded. His aunt had supported him when he’d needed her, and how had he repaid her? He’d left her alone, even though he’d known she must be lonely after Uncle Jonas’s death. That would end. While being Cimarron Creek’s sheriff was important, Travis was also Bertha Henderson’s great-nephew. That was important too. It might only be for a few minutes, but he resolved to visit her every day. Tonight he would . . .

Before Travis could finish his thought, he heard the distinctive rumbling of the coach and saw the cloud of dust that accompanied it during most of the summer. Girding himself for the coming encounter with his father, he waited until the coach stopped, then fixed a smile on his face as the driver climbed down from his perch and opened the door.

Travis had expected a one-legged man with a scowl on his face. He did not expect the first passenger to disembark to be a beautiful young woman. Golden-haired and dressed in a more formal style than any of Cimarron Creek's ladies, she was a vision of loveliness. Travis stared, trying not to let his jaw drop open in shock. Had God answered Warner's prayer? It hadn't been an official prayer, but his cousin had definitely expressed a need for a beautiful young woman, and here she was. Travis hadn't seen a woman this beautiful in . . . The simple truth was, he couldn't recall the last time he'd seen anyone who came close to her. Catherine was easy on the eyes, but she was his cousin. This woman was not.

The woman looked around, clearly assessing the town while the driver unloaded her baggage. Did she find Main Street as pleasing as Travis did with its well-kept stores and the tree-branch canopy, or was she expecting something grander? Though she'd said not a word, her clothing and hairstyle made Travis believe she'd come from a large city, probably one in the East. Which raised the question of why was she here. It didn't appear that she was expecting to be met, which made the woman's arrival distinctly odd. Unaccompanied, unexpected women simply did not come to Cimarron Creek.

Who was this woman? Just as importantly, where was Pa? Pa moved slowly, and of course he would have let the lady leave the coach first, but he should have disembarked by now.

Travis took another step toward the stagecoach, only to see the driver close the door, then drag the two trunks onto the boardwalk.

“No more passengers for Cimarron Creek?” Travis asked. Though he recognized most of the drivers on the line, he’d never seen this man before.

The driver shook his head. “No, sir. That’s all.” He tipped his head toward the beautiful woman standing in front of the mercantile. “I reckon the other passengers will be glad to see the last of her. Purty near every time we stopped, I got an earful about her.”

Unwilling to engage in gossip, Travis refused to ask the driver why the others had objected to the lovely lady, but the driver took his silence as license to continue. “She’s a Yankee, you know,” the man said as he climbed onto his perch. “Like those confounded carpetbaggers.”

Just what Cimarron Creek didn’t need. Edgar Ellis’s arrival had caused enough of a stir, and though he’d gradually gained acceptance, Travis suspected the only person who truly regretted his disappearance was his wife.

When the stagecoach pulled away, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake, Travis saw that the woman hadn’t moved. Perhaps she was waiting for someone after all. He wouldn’t count on that.

“How can I help you, ma’am?”

The stranger turned, apparently startled by the friendliness of his tone. If the driver’s comments were accurate, she hadn’t been welcomed inside the coach. Travis’s official duties didn’t include welcoming strangers to town, but he was a Whitfield, and Whitfields were expected to maintain Cimarron Creek’s reputation as a friendly place.

The woman dipped her head slightly and managed a small smile. Travis took a deep breath. Close up, she was even more beautiful than she’d been at a distance. Her features were as perfect as the ones he’d seen in those ladies’ magazines Aunt Bertha favored, her eyes as blue as the summer sky. And when she smiled, well, a man would have to be blind in both eyes not to be dazzled.

“I’m looking for someone,” she said slowly. “My . . .” Breaking off whatever it was she had planned to say, she shook her head. “I’m looking for Mr. Ellis, Edgar Ellis. Can you tell me where I might find him?”

Travis felt as if he’d taken a mule kick to the stomach. “I wish I could.” He saw the woman’s confusion. Truth was, he was confused too. When Edgar had arrived in Cimarron Creek, Travis’s impression had been that the man was a loner. He’d never spoken of family or friends, and like many men who’d headed West, he’d chosen not to speak of his past.

Travis narrowed his eyes, considering the woman who wanted to find Edgar. Though he saw no other resemblance, the stranger had the same coloring as the missing man. Perhaps she was his sister. Travis wouldn’t blurt out his question. That would be rude, and if there was one thing his mother had taught him, it was to be polite to ladies. Even though his position as sheriff occasionally required a firm interrogation, there were other ways to get the information he needed from this woman.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I seem to have forgotten my manners. I’m Travis Whitfield, and I’m the sheriff here. I’ll do whatever I can to help you, Mrs. . . .” He let his voice trail off, encouraging her to volunteer her name.

“It’s Miss. Miss Lydia Crawford.”

Not Ellis. That meant, unless they had different fathers, Miss Crawford wasn’t Edgar’s sister. Perhaps she was a cousin. Or perhaps she was no relation at all, but in that case, Travis wondered why she’d come.

“I would appreciate it if you could direct me to Edgar.” Her voice was clear, each word carefully enunciated. It was a pleasant voice, but it was also a Northern voice that would garner her few friends in Cimarron Creek. The townspeople might not be as outspoken as the other passengers on the stagecoach had been, but they did not welcome Yankees.

Travis wished it were otherwise. He also wished he did not

have to disappoint this woman who looked like she needed a friend, but there was no way around it. He was going to disappoint her. “That’s the problem, Miss Crawford. I can’t direct you to him. Edgar disappeared last week. No one knows where he’s gone.”

Miss Crawford recoiled as if he’d hit her, and for a moment Travis thought she might crumple onto the boardwalk. “Edgar’s gone?” Her voice was filled with disbelief.

“That’s right, ma’am. I wish I could help you, but I’ve been unable to find him.” There had to be something he could do for her. Travis thought quickly. “Would you like to talk to his wife?”

This time there was no doubt about it. Miss Crawford was going to faint. As blood drained from her face, Travis stepped forward and put an arm around her. She looked up, those beautiful blue eyes filled with pain, and the words came out as little more than a croak.

“His wife?”