

CIMARRON CREEK
TRILOGY • 3



AMANDA
CABOT



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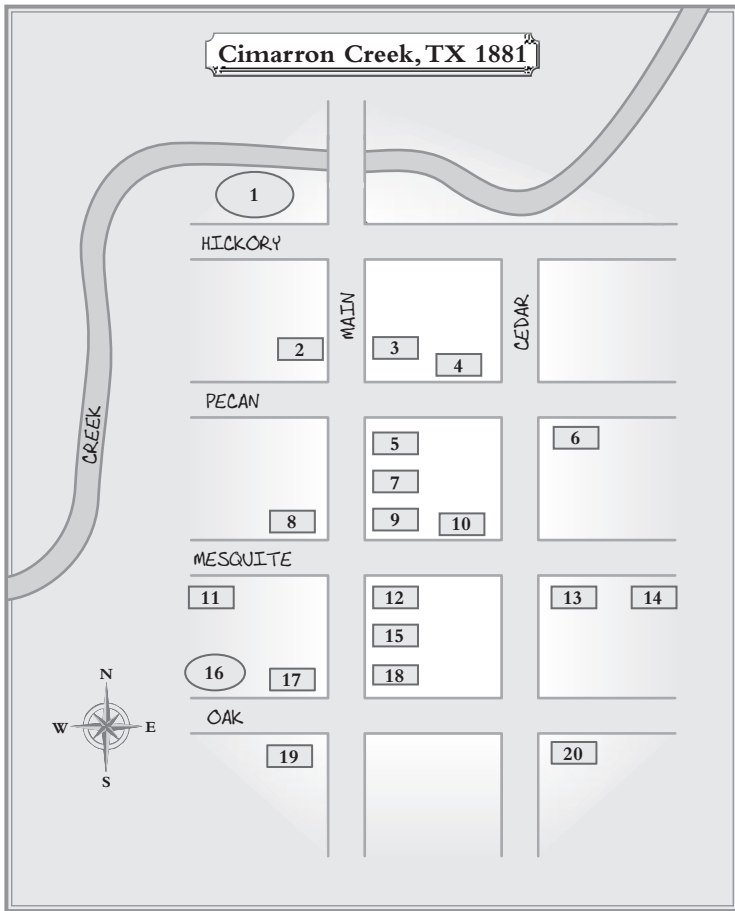
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

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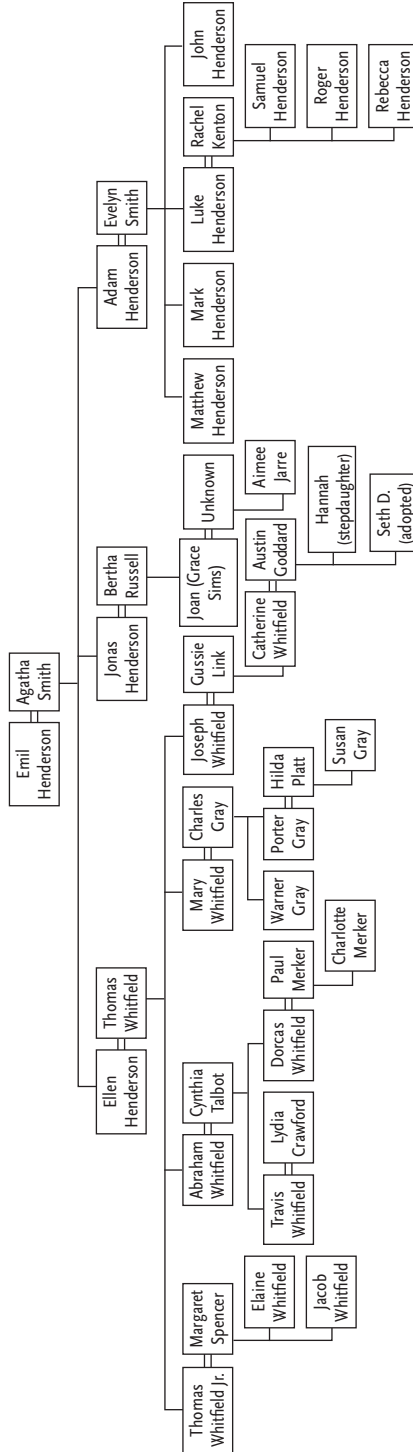
For Mary Gillgannon and Joanne Kennedy,
fellow writers and the best of friends.
Your stories inspire me; your insights into human
nature continue to amaze me; your friendship
buoys me during those dark moments that seem
to be an intrinsic part of writing.
Thank you!





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| 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—Warner Gray's home |
| 4—Thea's home | 15—Mayor's office/post office |
| 5—Mercantile | 16—Cemetery |
| 6—Lydia and Travis'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—Opal and Edgar's home | |
| 11—Patience's home | |

Descendants of Emil Henderson





AUGUST 8, 1881

She was free.

Thea Michener smiled as she checked the harness, then climbed into the buggy. Within minutes, she would be leaving the only home she could remember. As much as she loved Ladreville, whose half-timbered buildings and Old World charm made visitors declare it to be one of the prettiest towns in the Hill Country, it was time for a change.

While others might have trembled with fear over the thought of leaving family, friends, and all things familiar, the prospect filled Thea with relief. A new town, new possibilities, a new life beckoned her. A year ago she would not have dreamt of leaving, but that was a year ago. So much had changed in the past year, most of all Thea.

“But you haven’t changed, have you, Maggie?” Her smile widened into a grin as she looked at the bay mare that had carried her on countless journeys. The horse was the one part of her old life that she was taking with her, that and the tools of her trade. What she was leaving behind were the need for secrecy and the fear that someone would discover the truth she had tried so hard to hide.

Waving good-bye to the liveryman who'd cared for Maggie whenever Thea's business brought her into town, she set off down the street. It was time to be gone. The sun was already high in the sky, although a layer of clouds promised some relief from the heat of a Texas summer. Not for the first time, Thea was grateful for her buggy. The padded seat that some in Ladreville had considered an extravagance would make the long journey more comfortable, while the top—another extravagance according to the town's more frugal residents—would block most of the sun's rays.

“You sure you won't change your mind?” the mayor's wife asked as Thea passed her home. She had hoped to escape last-minute farewells, but a number of the town's matrons were outside their homes or strolling along the main street, apparently waiting to say good-bye to Thea or perhaps, like the mayor's wife, hoping to persuade her to remain.

Thea shook her head. Though she would miss the friends she had made, not to mention her sister, brother-in-law, and their children, she wanted—no, she needed—a complete change. Cimarron Creek would provide that.

Thea smiled as she waved at another woman, then smoothed a wrinkle from her skirt. Another change was coming. Tonight when she was miles away from those who would look askance at her action, she would remove her black garments for the last time. Just the thought brought a sense of peace, as if she'd shed a heavy burden. Thea knew she would never stop mourning her husband and son and the dreams that had died with them, but the outward trappings weighed her down, both literally and figuratively.

Not only did she hate black clothes, but the sight of them wasn't good for her patients. Women who were *enceinte*, to use the French word that sounded so much more genteel than the English “pregnant” with its harsh consonants, needed no reminder that not all babies were born healthy and that not all

fathers lived to hold their children in their arms. They didn't need the reminder, and neither did she.

Thea closed her eyes briefly, trying to block the painful memories. She wouldn't dwell on what had happened. Not today. Today was a day to celebrate the beginning of a new life, a day to put the past behind her.

Less than a minute later, she reined in Maggie in front of the parsonage.

"*Bonjour, Aimee,*" she said as a blonde woman, only a couple inches taller than Thea's own five foot two, hurried from the building and stowed the modestly sized valise that contained all her earthly belongings in the back of the buggy.

Thea was surprised that Aimee, the woman who'd explained that her name was pronounced eh-MAY, not Amy, was alone. She had expected the couple who had been her hosts during her time in Ladreville to accompany her to the buggy. Evidently they'd said their farewells in private.

Aimee returned the greeting in the same language, then shook her head and said, "Good morning. We should speak English, though. I need to get in the habit." Her hazel eyes held a note of apprehension, perhaps at the prospect of going to a town where English was the only language. Cimarron Creek did not share Ladreville's history.

Though almost everyone in Ladreville spoke English now, the town had been founded by immigrants from Alsace, and when Thea and her sister had arrived almost a quarter of a century ago, most of the residents had spoken either French or German. As a result, Thea had grown up trilingual.

It was a skill she rarely needed now that her generation had adopted English as their primary language, but it had proven helpful the day Aimee Jarre arrived. The woman had been so exhausted from her journey that she had struggled to find more than a few English words.

"Are you certain you want me to accompany you?" Aimee

asked as she settled onto the seat next to Thea. While her English was practically faultless, when she was distressed or fatigued, Aimee struggled for words, and whenever she spoke, her accent belied the fact that she was a native Texan, born right here in Ladreville.

“Yes, of course, I am.” Thea’s heart ached for the painfully thin woman who’d traveled all the way from France to the heart of the Texas Hill Country in search of the mother who’d given her up for adoption. As heartbreaking as the past few months had been and as heavily as her fears weighed on her, Thea’s life had been easier than Aimee’s.

The day Aimee had arrived in Ladreville, it had been obvious to Thea that she had not eaten in days, for she’d practically fainted when she’d climbed down from the stagecoach. Fortunately, Thea had been passing by and had taken her to the parsonage. She had known Pastor and Mrs. Russell would care for Aimee, but it was only later that Thea realized that she had helped Aimee with her quest by leading her to the house where she had been born.

As the light breeze teased her bonnet strings, Thea smiled at her companion. If the breeze continued, the midday heat might feel less oppressive. Even if it did not, they were on their way, and that felt oh, so good. For Thea, it was a new beginning, a chance to forge a life where no one would learn what had happened. For Aimee, this could be the end, the final step that would reunite her with her mother.

“I’m glad you’re coming with me,” Thea told the young Frenchwoman. Though Aimee had been born in Ladreville, she had spent the rest of her life in a small French town and was, for all intents and purposes, French. It was virtually impossible to think of her as a Texan.

As they reached the town’s limits, Thea continued. While she wouldn’t share all her reasons for being grateful for Aimee’s companionship, she wanted her to understand that they were

helping each other. Aimee had already bemoaned her inability to pay her share of expenses.

“You came at exactly the right time. My sister was having a conniption at the thought that I might drive to Cimarron Creek alone. Sarah forgets that I’m twenty-seven and not a child any longer.”

“Ancienne.”

Thea laughed, both at the word itself and the fact that Aimee had already forgotten her resolution to speak only English. “There are days when I do feel ancient,” she admitted, “but today’s not one of them.”

For far too much of the past year, her fears had made her feel older than Sarah despite the fact that Sarah was twenty years her elder. The need to escape those fears and put the past behind her was one of the reasons the position in Cimarron Creek had sounded so attractive to Thea.

“You seem happier this morning than I’ve ever seen you,” Aimee said in lightly accented English.

“I am.” The thought of a new life filled Thea with an almost unbelievable sense of freedom. “The announcement that Cimarron Creek needed a midwife came at exactly the right time.”

“For me too.” Aimee turned to glance back at the town where she’d been born. From this distance, it appeared peaceful, a place where nothing could go wrong. Thea knew otherwise, and so did Aimee.

“God’s timing is perfect,” Aimee continued. “He was looking out for me when he brought me to Ladreville and you.”

He’d been looking out for Thea too. “I hope you find your answers in Cimarron Creek,” she said, deliberately changing the subject, “but even if you don’t, it will be wonderful having you with me. Travis Whitfield—he’s the man who hired me—said the town would welcome me, but I’ll still be a stranger for a while. I’m glad I’ll have a friend with me.”

Aimee had become a friend more quickly than Thea had

thought possible. The young Frenchwoman had arrived in Ladreville less than two weeks ago, but from the first hour she had spent with her, Thea had felt a connection between them. Though she couldn't identify the reason, she felt as if Aimee was the younger sister she'd always wanted, and when it had turned out that Aimee's mother had come from the same town that had hired Thea as its midwife, she had known that was no coincidence. They were meant to go together.

If all went as planned, Aimee would find her mother, and Thea would begin a new life, a life free from secrecy, fear, and worry. No matter what anyone said, no matter what anyone thought, she was not running away.



She was trying to run away from him. Jackson Guthrie scowled as Ladreville's sheriff told him the woman he'd tracked this far had left town only hours before he arrived. Somehow—and he didn't know how, since there'd been no sign of the rest of the Gang—she must have realized that he was searching for her. Admittedly, the story that she'd accepted a position as a midwife in another town sounded plausible, but the timing was suspect. It was more likely that with her husband dead, she'd decided to operate from a different location.

The Gang had done that before. That was part of what made finding them so difficult. They kept moving, and when they weren't robbing stagecoaches or trains, they simply disappeared from sight. Three men and a woman. The Gang of Four. And unless his hunch was totally wrong, she was one of them.

She was running. Jackson didn't doubt that for a minute. What she didn't know was that she couldn't outrun him. Texas Rangers always got their man, or in this case, their woman.

"C'mon, Blaze," he said as he swung into the saddle. "We've got a ways to go."

As the sun rose the next morning, Jackson yawned. The

journey was taking longer than he'd expected. When Blaze had stumbled and injured his fetlock, Jackson had had no choice but to slow their pace. He wouldn't risk further injury by pushing the gelding, nor would he do what some men might have and return to Ladreville to find another horse. He and Blaze had been together for five years. They were partners, and one partner didn't abandon the other.

And so, although he'd thought he would overtake his quarry before nightfall, he had not. When he'd realized how slowly he'd have to travel, Jackson had given up on the idea of apprehending the suspect along the way and had decided to head straight for Cimarron Creek. Rather than stop, he'd ridden all night. If there were no other delays, he should reach the town before Thea Michener and the Frenchwoman who was accompanying her did, for the sheriff had said they'd planned to stop at an inn along the way.

Arriving before her would give Jackson an element of surprise, a weapon of a sort. If he combined that with a plausible reason for being there—something other than his official reason—he might lull her into making a mistake and revealing her guilt.

He yawned again, then smiled at the realization that he was within hours of achieving his goal. The day was beautiful. Hot, of course, but at least it was cooler here in the Hill Country than it was on the plains. Blaze's leg seemed better than yesterday, which was little short of a miracle, and Jackson was filled with anticipation. By nightfall he would have met the woman who held the key to his brother's killers, and if she slipped up and admitted what he suspected, he'd have her in custody faster than a rattler could strike.

His smile widened into a grin at the thought that he would be in Cimarron Creek in little more than an hour. From everything he'd heard, it was a friendly town. Why, it might even have a hotel. A night or two in a bed sounded good right now.

Jackson didn't consider himself old—after all, thirty wasn't decrepit—but he had to admit that sleeping on the ground had lost its appeal. So had—

His thoughts were interrupted by the unmistakable sound of a baby crying.

He reined in Blaze as he surveyed the area. There was no one in sight, and he hadn't passed any houses in the last hour. What was a baby doing out here in the middle of ranch territory? Jackson tipped his head to one side, listening intently. There was no question about it. A baby, an unhappy baby, was nearby.

“C'mon, Blaze. Let's see what we can find.”

It didn't take long to discover an infant lying beside the tallest prickly pear cactus in the field, its face red from crying and sunburn. The poor thing must be hungry. He took a deep breath, then frowned. Judging from the smell, the child was also in dire need of clean clothes.

Jackson rummaged through his saddlebags, pulling out a spare bandanna, and made short work of changing and cleaning the little boy. It had been years since he'd done that for his younger brother, but he hadn't forgotten how.

As he hefted the baby into his arms, the crying that had subsided momentarily resumed. Hunger, no doubt, and that was a problem. The boy was clearly too young for jerky or hardtack, but Jackson had no milk. He'd have to settle for drizzling some water into the child's mouth. That wouldn't fill an empty stomach, but it might help prevent dehydration.

Sure enough, as soon as he'd swallowed a little of the warm water, the boy's cries stopped, and he looked up at Jackson with eyes as blue as the summer sky. It might be his imagination, but Jackson thought the baby looked grateful for his rescue. The question was, why had he needed to be rescued?

As far as Jackson could see, there was nothing wrong with the child. He'd heard of parents abandoning babies with deformed limbs or faces marred by birthmarks, but this one had

no defects. Even when parents abandoned children, they usually left them at a church or on the porch of a home where they knew someone would find the infant. Why would anyone leave a baby here where his chances of survival were slim?

As soon as he'd taken care of Mrs. Michener, Jackson would track down whoever was responsible for this baby's plight. It might not be official Ranger business, but what had happened to this boy was criminal.

"All right, son," he said as he mounted Blaze. "You're coming with me to Cimarron Creek." The boy wasn't his son, of course. Still, the name sounded right. He had to call the baby something.

"We'll figure out what to do with you there," he promised.

A smile curved his lips at the thought that had popped into his mind. "You may be just what I need—an innocent-sounding reason for meeting Thea Michener."