ONE MORE RIVER TO CROSS

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Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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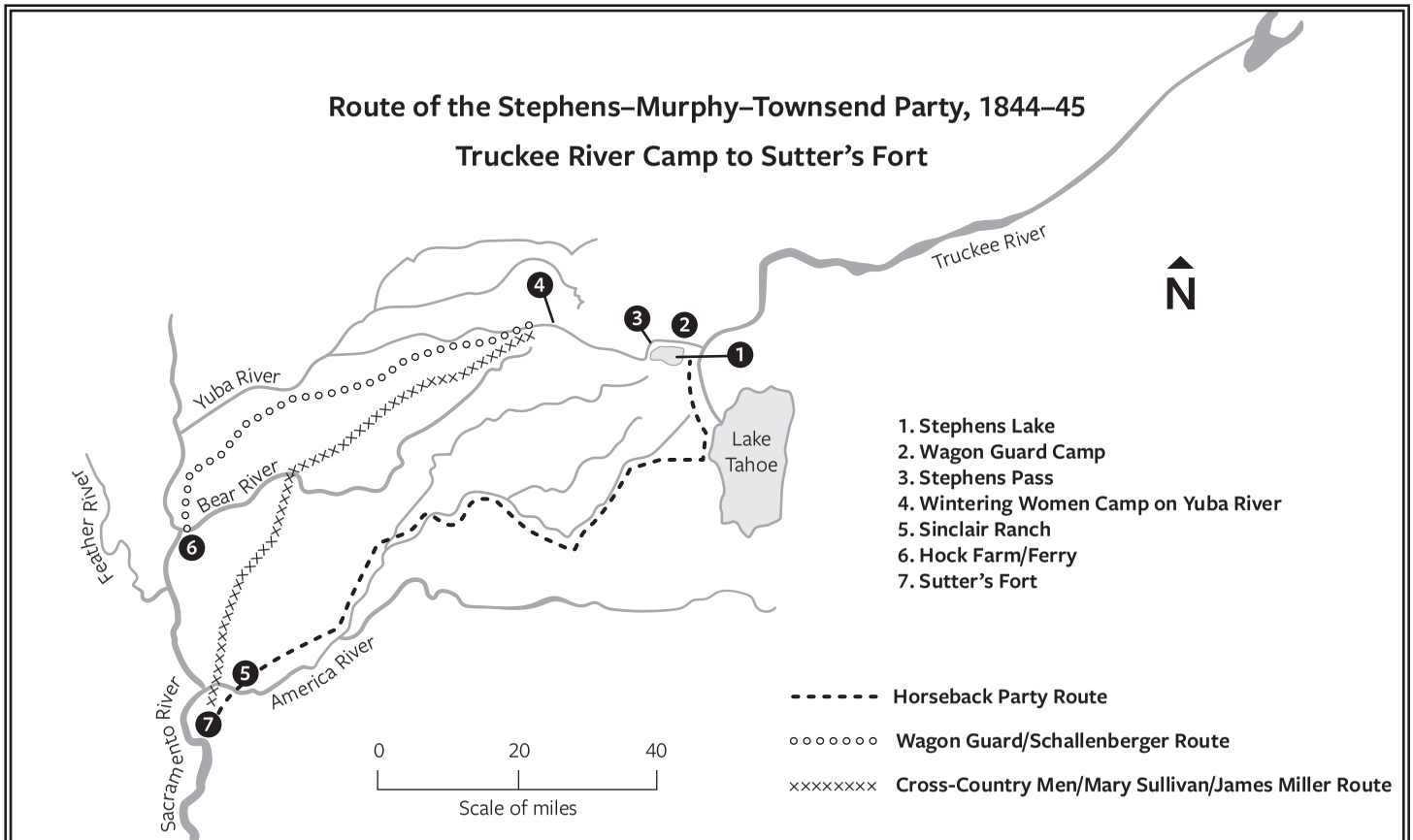
Dedicated to Jerry
For showing me how to cross rivers
and keep going



Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is that little voice that at the end of the day says "I'll try again tomorrow."

Mary Anne Radmacher, poet and artist

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly!
But westward, look, the land is bright!

Arthur Hugh Clough,
"Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth"

The Stephens-Murphy-Townsend Overland Party

1844–45

Horseback Group

Ellen Murphy (Townsend)—spirited beauty; daughter of Martin Murphy Sr.

Elizabeth "Beth" Townsend—asthmatic, wife of Dr. John Townsend, Ellen's sister-in-law

Daniel Murphy—hunter, struggling brother of Ellen

John Murphy—hunter, trained as Irish slinger, brother of Ellen and Daniel

François Deland—chef and French-Canadian servant

Oliver Manet—oxman and French-Canadian servant

Wagon Guards

Moses Schallenberger—hunter, 17 years old, brother of Elizabeth Townsend

Joe Foster—hunter, aid to Captain Stephens

Allen Montgomery—gunsmith, confident husband of Sarah Montgomery

The Wintering Women

Mary Sullivan—wears Aran wool sweaters, rounded braids at her ears, is Irish-Canadian—sister of John Sullivan and two younger brothers Michael and Robert

Maolisa (mail-issa) Bulger Murphy—housekeeper extraordinaire; mother of Elizabeth Yuba, BD, Mimi, and two others; wife of Martin Murphy Jr. ("Junior")

Ailbe (all-bay) Murphy Miller—wife of James Miller, mother of Ellen Independence and four others, daughter of Martin Sr. Has premonitions.

Sarah Armstrong Montgomery—quilter and knitter, wife of Allen

Isabella Patterson—widow; hoping to transform her life; daughter of Isaac Hitchcock; mother of four, including Lydia

Ann Jane Martin Murphy—"round as a rutabaga," wife of James Murphy, mother of Kate and Ide (ee-day)

Margaret Murphy—one of the two single Murphy aunts; sister of Johanna, Ellen, and Ailbe Miller and Murphy brothers

Johanna Murphy—the other single Murphy aunt; sister of Margaret, Ellen, and Ailbe Miller and Murphy brothers

Also at the Wintering Cabin

James Miller—hunter; husband of Ailbe; father of William and four others, including Ellen Independence

Patrick Martin Sr. ("Old Man Martin")—weak left arm; father of Dennis, Patrick Jr., and Ann Jane

Seventeen children total including BD, scampish son of Maolisa Murphy; infants Ellen Independence and Elizabeth Yuba; Lydia Patterson; the Sullivan "little boys"

Cross-Country Men

Captain "Capt" Elisha Stephens—hawkish nose, elected leader of party, blacksmith, trapper

Martin Murphy Sr.—widower, praying leader of party, Irish/Canadian/Missourian

Dr. John Townsend—physician, entrepreneur, husband of Beth

Martin Murphy Jr. ("Junior")—husband of Maolisa Bulger and father of Elizabeth Yuba

John Sullivan—assumes role of parent, Irish-Canadian, brother of Mary Sullivan

Bernard Murphy—son of Martin Sr.

James Murphy—husband of Ann Jane, father of Ide

Dennis Martin—has a lisp, rescuer, son of Patrick Sr.

Patrick Martin Jr.—son of Patrick Sr.

Old Caleb Greenwood—guide and trapper, pilot for the party

Britain Greenwood—buckskin-clad mixed-blood son of Caleb

John Greenwood—tobacco-chewing mixed-blood son of Caleb

Isaac Hitchcock—father of Isabella Patterson, grandfather and mountain man

Also four ox drivers

Prologue

Mary Sullivan stood outside the circle of men, watched through the triangle of elbows as they nodded and commented about the markings the Paiute drew in the dirt. Dust, the color of ash-laden snow, shrouded their brogans and britches as they stared at the desert lines indicating rivers, mountains, and lakes. Based on the scratching of a stranger, the men would decide their next course.

A dog barked. A child cried and was comforted.

One day, Mary vowed, she'd make her own choices, be clear about what mattered in her life, and hope to have the courage to act on that.

PART I

1

Sanctuary

October 1844

For a second day, the company that seventeen-year-old Mary Sullivan traveled with found sanctuary beside a river edged with willows and rocks in the shadow of distant mountains. Their green-painted Schuttler wagon had passed through a long desert onto this place of promise, where the sunset of pinks and yellows colored the rush of water. An Irish whistle rang a tune in competition with the bodhran likely pounded by Old Man Martin. The music gave respite in the midst of their slow journey toward the Sierra Nevada.

Mary scrubbed at the washboard. She wore her dark hair braided in rounds at her ears—just as her mother had—and she scoured her brother's pants like her mother had too, hundreds of times. It was what women did. *Such stains.* The boys ground dirt into cloth the way dogs rolled in mud: they saw it as a lark. She sat back on her heels. And why shouldn't they have fun? They were young. Mary licked the blood from her knuckles. Perhaps their boisterousness served as a bridge from sadness to acceptance.

The breeze cooled her face, and she returned to pound the stiff cloth harder. Her back ached. The other women chattered to each

other at the river's edge. She could join them—they'd welcome her—but she wasn't kin. What she wanted to do was tear off her poke bonnet and stand on her hands, maybe. Wouldn't that raise Irish eyebrows? She smiled. In Quebec when she was alone on the family's farm, she'd done such a thing, her linen skirts falling around her face like a waterfall. Her head buzzed, and she remembered laughing out loud, feeling strong as she saw the world upside down and made up poems like *Skirts and boots dance in the air, while tongues and eyes birth laughter.* But here, next to this river heading toward the mountains, she must express decorum or risk her brother's wrath.

"Did our mother neglect to teach you properly that your knuckles still bleed?" Mary's brother John stood over her now, accusing. He'd come upon her, silent as sunset.

She wondered if he still grieved.

She squinted up at him, shaded her eyes with her hand, her bonnet having slipped behind her, resting on her back. "How about you finish these trousers to show the little boys how it's done and that a man can do it as well as a woman."

He grunted. "A good effort, sister. You're behind on your duties and we have animals to tend to. I expect your help. Finish up."

She stood, twisted the pants to remove the water, then rubbed damp hands on her skirt. "See? All ready." She loved working with the oxen, scratching their big heads, feeling their velvety ears, and was happy indeed to give up scrubbing for that even when her brother demanded it.

"Take the clothes up to the wagon and meet me at the corral. You can hold the lead while I scrape out their hooves."

She made her retort a tease. "Maybe you'll take the rope and 'tis meself who'll clean their feet." She bundled the duds into her arms. "I'm closer to the ground than you."

He grunted. "Put your bonnet back on."

She was tempted to counter him, but instead she stayed silent and followed. Standing on her hands would have to wait for another day.

Sarah Armstrong Montgomery imagined the wispy clouds above her to be threads ready to be sewn into a quilt-backing as blue as bachelor buttons. If they found this balmy weather in Alta California, Sarah would stay there for life, contented as a honeybee, queen of its hive. Sarah had made a nest leaning back against the wagon tongue, a quilt rolled up behind her as a backrest. She'd removed her bonnet as she sat in the shade, brushed strands of blonde hair away from her eyes. She'd need to stitch up a loose portion of her faded green wrapper, but she could do that tomorrow. Laughter drew her eyes to her husband standing beside lovely Ellen Murphy. Allen Montgomery was a fine-looking man even if he did spend more time grooming his mustache than Sarah thought necessary. But today she had no complaints. Like the rest of the Stephens-Murphy-Townsend party comprised mostly of Irish Catholics, optimism perfumed the scene around her and Sarah felt relieved—relieved of the worry she'd carried with her from Missouri when she'd feared that they were heading toward trial and trouble and perhaps their deaths. She envied the Irish Catholics they traveled with. Their faith buoyed them like sticks on a stream flowing ever toward their destination, weathering bumps and bruises while praying over beads. And the truth of it was that nothing had gone terribly wrong these past five months.

Best of all, earlier that day, the men had met a lone Indian, and the elders—as she thought of them, old men of experience leading this company—had used sign language and drawings in the dirt to communicate. The Paiute, whom they'd named Truckee, gave them directions, advising them to follow this river they'd camped beside until they arrived at a fork with a smaller river heading west and another flowing south. There was some confusion about which way wagons would travel most easily. Earlier parties—the Bidwell-Bartleson train for one—had abandoned their wagons in 1841, so avoiding their aborted trail was optimal. It was this

Stephens-Murphy-Townsend party's goal to take wagons all the way to Alta California—a foreign land south of the vast Oregon Country and far north of the province's Mexican capital. Which stream they'd follow to get there Sarah wasn't certain, but either supposedly would end near Sutter's Fort. The men would decide once they arrived at the river's fork. But for now—they had a plan: travel until the decision place. A plan always comforted Sarah.

She looked at her fingernails. Still strong. Another good sign they'd carried with them the right foods and portions. Murphy wives and sisters snapped wet petticoats and sheets they'd rinsed at the shoreline. Children scampered with hoops or played "catch me" in the heavy dust. Her own clothesline, strung earlier, sagged with the laundry she'd washed that morning. She heard aprons and wrappers flap in the late afternoon breeze. Time to take them down. She watched as dark-haired Mary Sullivan followed her brother toward the corrals, head down. Mary was a quiet soul, a loner, carrying her brother's duds. *Duds*. Such a spritely word for mundane things like worn clothes or cloaks.

Sarah ran her palm over her stringy blonde hair. It needed a good wash. Tomorrow. Captain Stephens said they'd remain another day, then start out on the last leg. *Last leg.* What did that really mean? Only one leg left to stand on? Or the last table leg to attach for a finished product? Words were entertaining. She could amuse herself for hours with words. If only she could read them.

Ellen Murphy retied the ribbon around her hair and lifted the auburn mass of curls from her neck, bending as she did to cup a palmful of river water she flicked at Allen Montgomery. He skipped backward. "Is this your way of suggesting I bathe, Miss Murphy?"

"Not in the least, Mr. Montgomery. 'Tis my way of helping cool a man's effort to help a woman on so warm a day." She curtsied and smiled.

Allen had offered to help, a kind gesture Ellen's brothers would never think of. He was a handsome man, gentle with his wife from what Ellen had seen on their journey west. He hoisted the laundry basket onto his shoulder and the two walked side by side. Some married men were gentle, Ellen decided. Were they that way to begin with or did marriage rub off harsh edges, love bring out their goodness? She enjoyed the company of men. Some men. And it was her limited experience—she was only twenty years old—that married men were safest to engage with. Married men were committed, and most respected their marital boundaries, none more than Allen Montgomery. Ellen relied on that restraint, which allowed her to enjoy an occasional tease and toss of her hair while in the company of men.

"All tidied up," Ellen said as Sarah Montgomery approached them. "Your husband's a good wringer, he is."

Sarah laughed. "I get him to help with laundry whenever I can. Good strong hands, that one."

"And shoulders."

Ellen noticed how Sarah subtly brought her husband closer to her hips, letting Ellen walk as though alone, as they headed toward the wagons paralleling the river. Allen's face carried a tint of pink, broken by his mustache, the ends braided on either side of his smile.

The aroma of cooking meat caused Allen to inhale. "Smells good, darlin'." Sarah walked backward in front of him.

"I hope you like it. You're welcome to stay for stew too, Ellen."

"'Tis laundry-hanging that calls me name," Ellen said. "Another time, certain."

Allen pointed with his chin to activity behind his wife. "You'd better get Chica out of the way or she'll have our supper first."

"What? She's back?" Sarah turned and sprang forward while the dog circled the hanging cast-iron pot. Smoke from the small fire spiraled upward. Fortunately, the stew was too high for the dog to topple, but not for lack of effort. Chica bounced around, barking, and Sarah shooed her off.

"The pup has a way of finagling food," Ellen said. "I'll walk her home. Come along, you little chancer. 'Tis leftovers as fodder for you tonight." The dog pranced happily beside Ellen as she stepped over the wagon tongue and motioned for Allen to hand her the basket.

"Venison stew, is it?" she heard Allen ask his wife as she walked away.

"I'm surprised you noticed, paying attention to Miss Murphy as you were." Sarah kept her voice teasing, but Ellen heard the worry in it. She'd have to be more careful. She didn't want to tear at the fabric of a marriage.