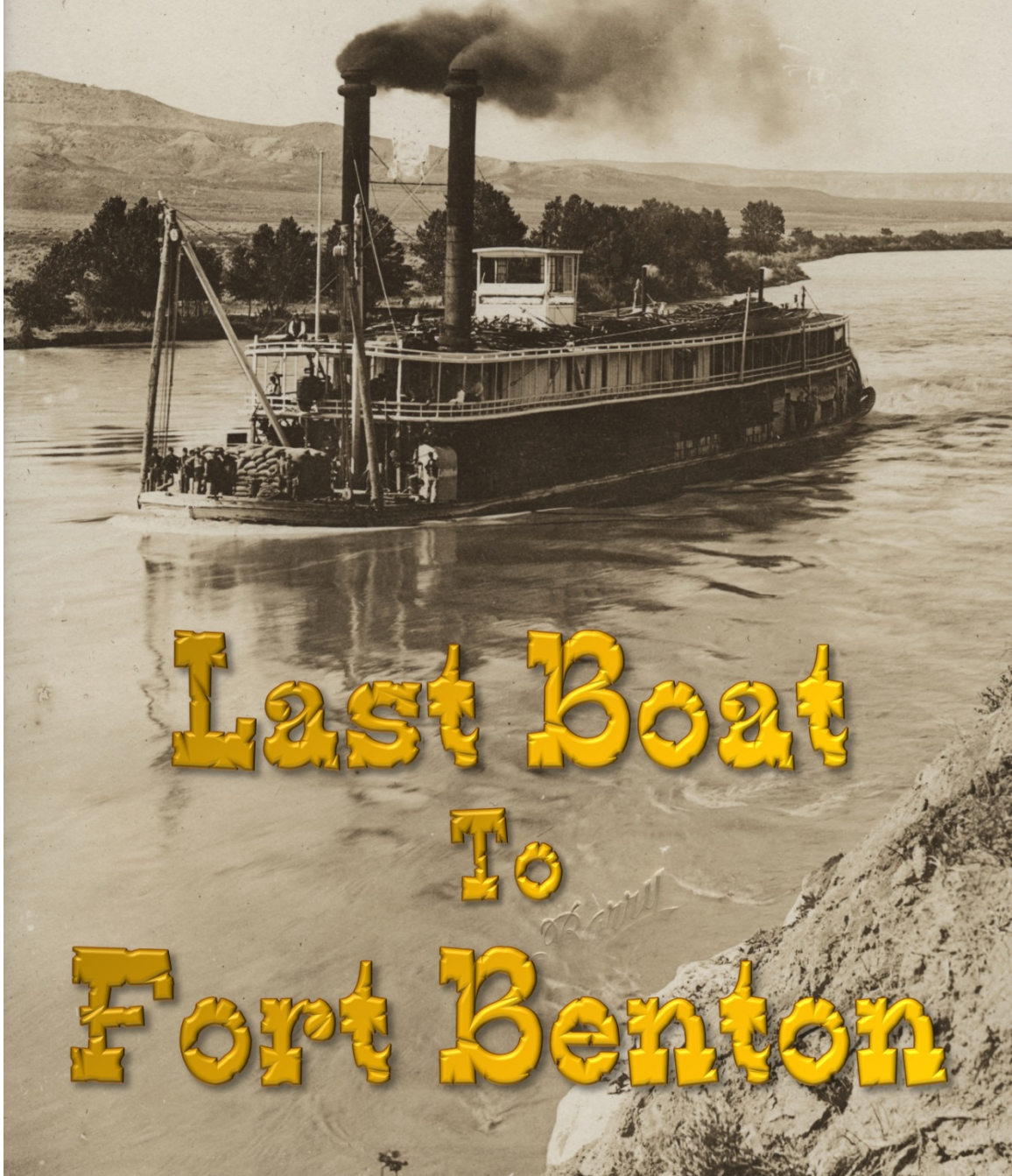
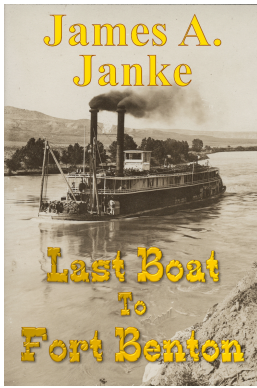


James A. Janke



Last Boat
To
Fort Benton



Very late in the Civil War Confederate Colonel Thaddius Kingsley and the tattered remnants of his regiment board the steamboat West Wind in St. Joseph, Missouri. He tells Captain Zachary Cole that the war is lost and they are heading for the goldfields in Montana so they can return to their homes with the resources needed to rebuild. Kingsley brings his beautiful daughter Rebecca along, reassuring Cole of his intentions.

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ISBN:

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Cover photo:

Steamboat *Rosebud* at Drowned Mans Rapids on the Missouri River in Montana.

David F. Barry, 1878.

State Historical Society of North Dakota. 0022-H-0063

You can see Barry's "signature" just to the lower right of To in the title.

Dedicated to
Joanne

Last Boat To Fort Benton

By

James A. Janke

Chapter One

The hungry flames chewed and clawed at the steamboat's planking and bulkheads, gobbled up the stacked cordwood and feasted on the bowels of the proud vessel. Her superstructure collapsed with a moan and a screech of agony; an enormous cloud of sparks and smoke mushroomed upward into the dark sky.

"There she goes," Captain Zachary Cole sighed with a wince. He was leaning against a stanchion on the boiler deck of his own steamboat, the *West Wind*, a half mile away at the opposite end of the St. Joseph levee. He uncrossed his arms and blew into his cupped hands; April nights were still cold in Missouri.

Burt Moore, Cole's first mate, sat on a railing next to him, leaning inboard with his elbows propped on his knees and trimming a thumbnail with a long-bladed knife. He looked back over his shoulder. "She was a good boat, too," he commented. He returned to his carving. "I say it could've been some die-hard Rebs, Zach."

"Maybe," Cole said. "More likely just some rooster down in the hold with a candle looking for whiskey. If I were going to torch a steamboat, I'd wait till there was a morning breeze and maybe get several boats at once."

Moore considered that. "You got a point." He glanced at the hint of yellow in the eastern sky. "And no breeze for a while." He finished with the knife and slipped it back into its sheath. "And just how many more dawns are we gonna watch just sittin' here in St. Joe, Zach?"

"The hold's still half empty, Burt," Cole told him. "Before going on upriver I want to replace the ninety tons of army supplies we delivered here from St. Louis."

"We've been here over a week already," Moore complained. He dropped off the railing and turned to watch the conflagration in the distance. "There just ain't that much freight goin' north from St. Joe. And we already lost all our passengers 'cept one. The rest've transferred to other boats pushin' on. The *Mountain Queen*, the *Big Horn*, the *Pathfinder*, the—"

"I think Major Van Hill will stay as long as I keep the bar open," Cole said. "Besides, we're smaller and faster than those other boats. We may overtake them, anyway."

Moore shrugged. "Well, if we wait much longer we're gonna get stopped by low water way short of Fort Benton. And I don't relish freightin' our cargo overland halfway cross Montana Territory."

"I know the risks," Cole said patiently. He realized that all his first mate saw was the great amount of work involved in navigating the Upper Missouri in low water. Moore was not considering the huge profits possible by reaching Fort Benton with a full cargo instead of half empty.

Moore was quiet for a while, watching the burning steamboat. "Maybe if we left now we could make two trips this summer," he said. "Steamboats've been gettin' all the way to Fort Benton only for the last five years. Nobody's tried two trips before. Light as we are we could probably make it up there in record time. Then race back to St. Louis, get another half-load

and—”

“And maybe lose the *West Wind* to low water in July,” Cole said. “Too risky. We’ll wait until—”

“Captain Cole?” a voice called from below.

Cole and Burt looked down and saw two men standing at the foot of the *West Wind*’s landing stage. “Yes,” Cole answered. “I’m Captain Cole. What can I do for you?”

“Is it too early in the morning to discuss business?”

Cole straightened up. “Certainly not, sir,” he replied quickly. “Come aboard. My office is up here.”

“Thank you, Captain.” The man who had spoken walked briskly up the landing stage to the main deck, followed by the second man at a respectful distance.

Moore sidled closer to Cole. “The one in front looks pretty well-heeled, Zach,” he whispered.

“Indeed,” Cole whispered back. “This looks encouraging.”

The two visitors ascended the forward stairs to the boiler deck, and Cole and Moore stepped over to meet them.

“Captain Zachary Cole, at your service, gentlemen,” Cole said, shaking hands with the first man.

“Thaddius Kingsley, Captain,” the man announced. “And this is my associate, Mr. Raasch.”

“Mr. Raasch,” Cole said. Raasch nodded slightly without offering a handshake. “And may I introduce my first mate, Mr. Moore,” Cole continued. Kingsley shook Moore’s hand.

Cole quickly sized up the two men. Kingsley was middle-aged, gray-haired, with an aspect of authority and self-importance about him. His clothes were clean and well-tailored, though they seemed a bit baggy, as if the man had recently lost a lot of weight.

Raasch’s appearance contrasted sharply with Kingsley’s. Raasch was only slightly older than Cole and had a lean, muscular physique and a confident, almost belligerent manner of holding his big frame, with a penetrating stare that revealed nothing of his thoughts. His clothes were rough and looked like they’d been lived in for weeks. Cole also noted a pistol tucked into his belt.

“My office is this way, Mr. Kingsley,” Cole directed.

The group followed Cole to the most forward cabin on the starboard side of the boiler deck superstructure. Inside the lighted compartment Cole pulled out a chair for Kingsley and sat down himself at a desk. Moore took a position against an inner bulkhead, while Raasch lounged against the cabin’s outer doorjamb.

“Some excitement down at the other end of the levee this morning,” Cole began idly.

“Captain,” Kingsley said, “I would like to dispense with the amenities and get right down to business.”

Cole nodded. “By all means, sir.”

“I have a shipment for Fort Benton in Montana Territory,” Kingsley stated. “I believe you are about to depart for that destination yourself.”

Cole nodded again. “That’s correct, sir. How much freight do you have?”

“I’d say slightly under a hundred tons.”

Cole spread his hands in delight. “That’s splendid, splendid,” he said. “It just so happens I have half my cargo space available.”

“That, too, was my information. What are your rates?”

“From here to Fort Benton, ten cents a pound.”

“That’s competitive with other boats. It’s about two thousand miles to Fort Benton, isn’t it?”

“And then some,” Cole said.

“Very well,” Kingsley said. “Now, one hundred tons at ten cents a pound is...”

“Twenty thousand dollars, sir,” Cole said quickly.

Kingsley smiled. “You have a quick mind for figures, Captain.”

It was Cole’s turn to smile. “That’s good business. And, Mr. Kingsley, I’m afraid I must insist on payment in advance.”

“That, too, is only good business,” Kingsley responded. “Very well, my freight will be here within the hour.” He rose briskly.

Cole reached for a pen and paper on his desk. “Who is the shipment to be consigned to?” Cole asked.

“I will accompany the shipment, Captain,” Kingsley said. “I will need three single cabins and deck passage for thirty.”

Cole raised his eyebrows as Moore blurted, “Thirty? That’s quite a crew.”

“I take it then, Mr. Kingsley, that your cargo is not dry goods?” Cole ventured. “Mining equipment perhaps?”

“Exactly, sir.”

“Ah,” Cole said with a smile of understanding. “You don’t intend to sell to the miners; you are going to dig the gold up yourself. And no placer mining for you, eh?”

“Precisely, sir,” Kingsley said.

“Well, I caution you about hiring some of the men you’ll find unoccupied in this town right now. The war soon ending has set some pretty desperate men adrift—”

Kingsley interrupted. “I am in a hurry, Captain,” he said. He got to his feet. “But I will choose carefully.”

Cole rose too. “Well, I believe you have the right idea. There’s been little work done in the Montana goldfields so far. The war has held up any extensive exploration since gold was discovered there a couple of years ago. But this spring Grant’s going to bust Lee’s line at Petersburg and take Richmond soon as the roads dry out. Then there’ll be a rush out here that—”

“Really, Captain, I’m a very busy man. How much is the passenger fare?”

Cole didn’t care for Kingsley’s curtness, but it didn’t matter. “Cabin passage to Fort Benton is one hundred dollars a person. Deck passage is fifty.”

“That makes a total of eighteen thousand dollars for the passengers,” Kingsley said.

“That’s correct, sir,” Cole agreed.

“Very well,” Kingsley said. He shook hands with Cole again. “Good day, then, sir. I shall return shortly.”

“It’s a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Kingsley,” Cole said with a genuine smile on his face.

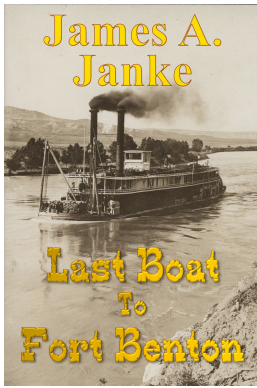
Kingsley strode out the door, and Raasch followed briskly. Cole and Moore went to the boiler deck railing and watched the two men descend the landing stage of the *West Wind* and head up the levee, cutting a swath through the growing crowd that had come to gawk at the burning steamboat or to start the day’s work.

“You see, Burt, a little patience can pay off handsomely,” Cole said. He was still smiling broadly.

“You’re right, Zach,” Moore admitted.

Cole glanced to the east; the sky was quite bright now. “Well, get the roosters up,” he said. “There’ll be plenty of work for ‘em in an hour. See that they get a good breakfast.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”



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