

# COWGIRL THRILL RIDER



SAHALIE BLUE  
STERLING SCOTT

BLUSHING BOOKS

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PART I  
SAND HILL COUNTRY



## CHAPTER 1



JULY, 1916

### THE CHERRY COUNTY FAIR

Sweat beaded on Polly Duffy's upper lip. As with every summer day in central Nebraska, this day promised to be sunny and hot. However, the sun had yet to reach its apex in the sky, and its rays were not the cause of the fourteen-year-old girl's perspiration.

With a quick shake of her head, Polly flicked off the distracting evidence of her anxiety. Glancing to her left, she caught sight of her parents. Her father stood, blocking the view of those behind him in the gallery. He waved and smiled encouragement to his youngest daughter. Polly noticed that her mother sat, ramrod straight, on the bleacher. With pursed lips, the woman stared at the colorful rodeo clowns in the center of the arena.

A grunting "moo" turned Polly's attention away from the spectators to the cowboys herding a steer into the narrow bucking

chute below her. The fluid motion of the beast's flexing muscles appeared in hypnotic slow-motion. Rebelling against the intentions of the cowboys, the steer rammed his seething 600 pounds against the wooden gates. The men jumped back to escape the animal's rib-breaking fury.

Polly sat motionless on the chute's top rail as the men dropped a rope with an attached cowbell around the steer's body. She didn't give the bell a second thought. Her brothers had told her bells were commonly used in steer riding to annoy the bovine, causing him to buck harder. In addition to the sound it made, the bell gave the rope some extra weight. Once she was no longer on its back, the rope would fall off the steer.

Steadying the animal, the cowboys wrapped the rope around his chest, just behind his front legs. Polly's saddle was attached to the steer's quivering back.

"Sure you can ride ole Volcano, little girl?" a cowboy with a missing front tooth asked, as he cinched her saddle.

"Polly can ride him. She can do anything."

She swiveled her head to see her seventeen-year-old brother, Frederick, standing beside the chute. Polly swallowed, and her heart soared from her brother's vote of confidence.

"Yes, sir, I've been riding since I was three." Polly swung her legs over the top board and prepared to mount the beast.

"I sure hope you know what yer doin'. Why they let females ride steers is somethin' I'll never understand. God help ya." Despite the toothless cowboy's muttering, he professionally steadied her and lowered her onto Volcano's back. The creature shuddered like the erupting mountain for which he had been named as she eased into her saddle.

A second cowhand snorted condescendingly, "It'd be a cold day in hell 'fore I'd let a daughter of mine wear pants, say nuthin' of riding an ornery critter like this. I'd paddle her backside good ifn she tried either." He nodded smugly and spat tobacco juice.

Polly ignored the naysayers and focused her attention on

Volcano. She patted his flank in an effort to calm him. Animals seemed to like Polly. Though she knew she couldn't communicate with them, she thought they could sense her intentions were honest. Her father had taught her that she was in charge of the animal. His words echoed in her head, "Polly, you must let him know you're relaxed and not afraid. Then, he knows he can trust you."

Never before had a female been allowed to ride a steer at the Cherry County Fair, but Polly's friend, fifteen-year-old Lillian Hastings, had pestered, cajoled and argued with the fair organizers to let her ride. They relented after talking with the girl's parents.

After hearing Lillian boast, Polly decided to ride a steer too. The organizers added a proviso that the girls ride the steers using their own saddles. Thus they created a cowgirl-only contest, hoping the novelty of girl steer riders would help sell tickets. They decided whichever girl stayed on her respective steer the longest would win. The timer would start when the animal's inside front shoulder passed the plane of the chute. The buzzer would sound after eight seconds, and a pickup man would be ready to pull her free of her saddle, assuming she could stay on that long.

Polly's mother, Irene, opposed the entire idea. She had been annoyed with Polly's tomboyish insistence at spending most of her days in the saddle, and this bronco-busting exhibition went against her dream of raising Polly as a proper young lady. Polly's father, Clarence, had taught her to ride. He beamed at her riding skill and eagerly gave his consent.

Lillian rode first and managed to stay on for four seconds before landing with a thump on the hard, dusty ground. Polly knew if she could stay on the creature until the buzzer sounded, she would win.

Polly's heart pounded, but she forced herself to be steady. She wrapped the steer rope around her right hand. As she had seen the cowboys do, she pounded her left fist into the gloved fingers of her right hand. Somehow, this was to stiffen her grip on the rope. She

gritted her teeth and nodded determinedly to the gatekeeper. Keeping her brown eyes transfixed on her right hand, commanding it to stay closed, she raised her left hand into the air. The chute gate snapped open, and Volcano erupted out. The wild steer kicked and spun like a cyclone as he tried to throw the diminutive girl from his back. She clutched the steer rope for dear life while her left arm whipped around her head. She lost her hat in the first second of the ride.

The onlookers whooped and hollered their encouragement.

“Ride ‘em cowgirl!”

“Hang on! You can do it!”

But Polly heard none of the cheers. All of her senses were concentrated on the motions of the steer, so much so that her ears didn’t register the clanging of the cowbell. The animal ducked his head between his forelegs and humped his back, trying to throw her forward. He spun, twisted, and whirled in tight circles, bucking furiously.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, the buzzer screeched. A second later, Polly released her grip and, as gracefully as one could, she tumbled to the ground. The pickup man positioned his horse between her and the steer, and the clowns ran around the ring to distract the angry animal’s attention away from her.

She jumped up and retrieved her cowboy hat. She slapped the hat against her thigh and yelled, “Yee-ha!” before racing like the wind out of the arena.

The crowd leapt to their feet, whistling and clapping for the diminutive beauty who had symbolically tamed the raging beast. She bowed and waved to the crowd, then bounded over to the judge’s table. Adrenaline coursed through her veins as she waited for her parents and brother.

As soon as she saw her father, she ran to him, jumping up and down. “Papa, Papa, I won!”

Clarence scooped his youngest child into his arms and kissed

the top of her head. "Of course you did, my little pollywog. I'm so proud of you! You won your very first contest."

With a tight smile, Lillian shook her hand. "Congratulations, Polly."

"Thank you."

Polly collected a bright blue ribbon and the twenty-five-dollar prize. With a huge smile on her face, she looped her arm through her father's and stated, "I think rodeo riding is a fine way to make a living."

After Polly's ride, the Duffy family returned to their wagon where Hannah, Polly's eighteen-year-old sister, and Walter, Hannah's twenty-one-year-old fiancé, waited. Along the way they passed through the County Fair, viewing table after table loaded with items for purchase. Potted plants and flowers. Squash, beets and cucumbers. Pies and breads. Fruit preserves, jams and jellies. One man was cutting slices of watermelon. A crude cardboard sign placed at the front of his table had the words scratched on it, "Winning Watermelon." Polly's stomach growled.

The annual event, held in the Cherry County seat of Valentine, Nebraska, drew people from fifty miles in every direction. Hopeful cowboys brought their finest horses, sheep, hogs, and cattle to be judged. Walter coveted that first prize ribbon for his sheep. Winning would ensure he would be on the way to providing for his family-to-be since other ranchers would want to breed their sheep with his own.

The animals milled around their corrals, sending dusty plumes of brown earth into the air. Steers bawled, and broncos kicked at their stalls. Excited children sucked on hard candies and ran laughing through the crowds as their mothers called after them to behave and not muss up their clothes. Carnival barkers called to fairgoers, enticing them to "step right up" and see the show. Polly thought everyone in the entire county had turned up for today's fair.

Polly ran ahead and skittered to a stop in front of their wagon.



Her sister, having competed in a horse race earlier in the day, sat in the shade watching their five horses munch hay. Each of the three children had insisted on riding their own horse to the County Fair, while their parents had brought the wagon with their lunch and other supplies. Walter had come a day earlier with his sheep.

“Hannah, look, I won!” Polly showed her sister the blue ribbon and money.

Hannah hugged her, and said, “I’m so proud of you.”

Irene caught up, interrupting the girls, “Polly, you and Hannah get my quilt over to the judging area. They’ve got the clothes lines strung up, and I see Mrs. Gottsch has already got her quilt hanging out.”

Polly looked to where her mother was pointing and saw several homemade quilts fluttering in the breeze. She imagined their makers were nervously awaiting judgment of their creations. The contest was to be held later in the day.

“Yes, Mama, we’ll tend to it right off,” Hannah replied.

Polly handed the prize money to her father, stashed the ribbon in her pocket, and climbed into the wagon. Rummaging around, she found the quilt. Unfortunately, in her adrenaline-fueled haste, she snagged the edge of the fabric on a splinter. Her enthusiasm waned as she examined the rip in one of the colorful squares.

“Now you’ve done it, Polly. Mama will be so mad at you,” Hannah exclaimed.

The young girl hung her head, the excitement of her winning diminished.

“I’ll tell her,” Hannah added, consoling her younger sister.

“No,” Polly touched her sister’s arm. “I’ll do it.”

Polly approached her mother with trepidation. Her request to ride the steer had caused a rift between her parents. Her mother had strongly objected, and during the ensuing argument Irene had been disrespectful to Clarence. His household rules forbade this, and he had punished his wife with a spanking. Polly felt the guilt weighing down heavily on her small shoulders as she had heard her

mother crying. Her father later said the argument wasn't her fault, but his statement didn't make Polly feel any better.

Polly turned to her mother. "Mama, do you have some thread and a needle? I'm sorry, the quilt ripped a little when I was pulling it out. I can fix it." Polly's voice trailed off as she noticed the scowl on her mother's face.

"Never mind. I'll take a look." Irene marched over to the wagon where Hannah stood with the quilt.

"It doesn't look so bad, Mama. It can be easily fixed." Hannah did her best to ease their mother's anger.

"Hannah, the problem is I didn't bring a needle and thread with me. Didn't think I needed one. And I'm certainly not going to ask that busybody Mrs. Gottsch for anything," Irene huffed. She snatched the quilt out of Hannah's hands to examine it.

"Damn it, girl. Why can't you be more careful?" She glared at her youngest daughter.

Clarence Duffy ambled over just in time to hear his wife cursing. "Irene, stop that swearing. You know I don't allow it, and certainly not in front of the children. You've just earned yourself another bottom warming when we get home."

"But," Irene started to protest then thought better of it.

"No ifs, ands, or buts. You should have thought to bring supplies from home," Clarence continued.

"Yes, dear," Irene muttered.

Hoping to diffuse the tension, Hannah offered, "Last time I was in Valentine, I noticed a new dress shop there on Main Street. I bet it's open today."

Clarence fished around in his pocket for a few coins. "All right. You girls ride into town and get your Mama whatever she needs to fix the quilt."

"Papa, I'll pay for it from my winnings," Polly offered.

He smiled and tousled her hair. "No need, girl. I'm setting that money aside for something special."

SHERIFF SPRAGUE'S Warning

"HURRY UP, let's get this over with." Hannah moaned as she dismounted in front of the dress shop. "I don't want to run into the sheriff again. That big oaf." She grunted her annoyance.

Hannah had ridden with breakneck speed into town. Polly had no trouble keeping up with her. *The faster, the better*, she had thought.

The girls entered the store, garnering a few hostile stares from other patrons. Polly overheard one say to her companion, "Look at those tight pants on that tall girl. My husband would take a switch to me if I showed up in public dressed like that."

Hannah ignored the women. She knew that their split skirts showed little more of their feminine curves than did regular skirts. Turning her attention to her task, Hannah quickly purchased the needle and thread their mother had requested then departed. As she was putting the package in her saddle bag, she heard a man's voice growl.

"Thought I told ya never to show up here wearin' pants again, missy. Didn't ya hear me?"

Hannah rolled her eyes and turned to see the sheriff standing, hands on hips. Pointedly ignoring his question, she stated, "Good morning, Sheriff Sprague. This is my younger sister Polly."

Squinting, Hannah pulled the brim of her hat lower to shade her eyes from the sun. The man's height forced her to look up to see him.

Polly nodded a greeting, but the sheriff was oblivious to her. Given the familiarity of their banter, she judged that this was not Hannah's first conversation with the sheriff.

"Don't think you kin sweet talk me, young lady." He wagged a finger an inch from the tip of Hannah's nose.

"Um, I don't know what you mean, sir. I was only trying to be polite," Hannah whined.

“Let’s go over to my office and have us a little chat.”

“Sheriff, please. My sister and I just came from the fair.” She pointed towards the fairgrounds, as though there was some question as to which one. “We’re running an errand for our mother, and we need to get back.”

“Oh.” The sheriff deliberately slowed the pace of his speech. “What I have in mind won’t take long. You come along, and bring your sister.” He paused to study Polly for the first time. “I see she’s wearing pants too.” He spat on the ground.

Snaring Hannah by the arm, he marched her across the street to the wooden jail. Polly thought for a moment about taking their purchase and high-tailing it back to the fair, but the sheriff had specifically said she was to follow. Not wanting to run afoul of the law, she trailed behind. Once inside, he plopped down on his chair behind his desk. He motioned for Hannah and Polly to sit, facing him. Polly had never been inside a jailhouse before. She studied the faces on the wanted posters.

The sheriff ran his hands over his face. “How is it your pa lets you girls run around wearing pants? That kinda outfit isn’t respectable for pretty young ladies to wear. Miss Hannah, I hope when you git married your husband-to-be puts his foot down. Ya look like cowboys when ya should be wearing long riding skirts. Or better yet, you should come ta town in a wagon wearing them floor-length hoop dresses with corsets, or whatever it is that proper young ladies wear.” He blushed slightly.

“Sheriff, these aren’t pants. They are split skirts,” Hannah argued. “Polly and I made them ourselves.” Hannah proudly lifted her nose into the air. “We cut our skirts up the middle and sewed them together to make divided legs. Besides, Polly and I were in riding contests at the fair this morning. It was simply more practical to wear the split-skirts than full ones,” she sniffed. “And anyway, there is no law saying women can’t wear pants if they want to, is there?”

“Well no, but, it ‘taint proper, and in my town, I want you gals to look like a gal and not a man.”

“There is nothing improper about women wearing pants. The suffragist Miss Lucy Stone wore them sixty years ago, and the lady ranchers, and the nurses, wear them too. It is 1916, after all.” Hannah had apparently anticipated this argument and had come prepared.

The sheriff shook his finger at her. “Don’t be insultin’. I know what year this is,” he spat. “Lucy Stone, eh? Now there is one busy-body you best not mention hereabouts. The church don’t allow pants, and I don’t allow pants.” He pinched off a piece of tobacco and stuffed it in his mouth. “Hannah, I warned ya that if I caught ya wearin’ one of those pant, skirt-things to town again, I’d spank your butt.” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Sheriff Sprague, I think it’s ridiculous that I can’t wear pants just because I’m a woman.” Hannah’s words spoke of self-righteous determination, but Polly sensed that her sister’s confidence had faded.

He got out of his chair and reached for Hannah’s arm. Growling, he said, “Come with me, young lady.”

With a sudden need to defend her sister’s honor—and her bottom—Polly spoke up. “Sheriff, she meant no disrespect. It can be dangerous to ride with a long, bulky skirt. Our cousin got the fabric caught up in her stirrup. She got dragged beneath her horse and was hurt. Surely you can see that.”

He didn’t reply. Apparently, to his way of thinking, there was no acceptable excuse that could be made. Polly followed him as he led Hannah down a hallway lined with empty jail cells. He directed her inside one.

“Sheriff, please, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be disrespectful,” Hannah pleaded one more time, her voice quivering.

“Now you git yerself in there. Kneel down, and bend over that there cot.”

Hannah knelt on the stone floor and turned back to look questioningly at the man.

“Butt-side up, girl. Don’t make me say it again.”

Polly watched as her sister lay over the narrow cot. Polly gritted her teeth as though it was her own backside in jeopardy. The sheriff rolled up his right sleeve, bent down, and firmly swatted Hannah’s bottom with his palm.

“Ow!”

“I’m just getting started,” he said, sternly. He pelted the young woman’s backside with hard, fast swats as he lectured. “It’s a disgrace to see females dressed in trousers. It’s an offense to the very fabric of civilization.”

Polly thought, *I’m surprised he knows such big words.*

Hannah wailed. “Stop! Oh, you stubborn, pig-headed old coot. Wait until I tell my papa about this.”

“Now you done made me good and mad, girl.” He pulled the fabric of her split skirt tight across her round bottom and applied several hard smacks to her sit spots. As the pitch of Hannah’s squeals increased, he worked his hard hand down the backs of her thighs.

“Ouch. *Ouch.* I’m sorry!” Hannah begged. “It won’t happen again.”

“Please, sir, stop!” Polly implored. She reached out to touch his arm, but thought better of interrupting him.

Ignoring the pleas of the two young women, the sheriff applied his steely palm over and over again on Hannah’s right cheek, her sit spot, and her thigh. Slowing the pace of the swats, so as to allow Hannah to feel the pain of each one, he repeated the sequence on the opposite side, and back again.

“Is your butt burned yet, young lady?” He laughed as he further scorched her tender flesh with his swats.

Hannah had stopped her complaints. She held silent, crying.

Finally, he stopped.

“All right now, you git up and sit on your stingin’ backside for a

while. I want you to think about what you done. You,” he motioned to Polly, “get in there and join your sister.”

Polly almost protested, but knowing it would fall on deaf ears, and afraid she might suffer the same fate, walked docilely through the jail cell door. She watched as the sheriff clanged the rusty iron door shut and turned the key in the lock. Reaching through the bars, he stabbed a finger at Polly.

“Yer get’n this lesson on the cheap, little miss. Best make sure that I’ve no cause to bring you back here again. Next time, you’ll get the same.” The corners of his mouth morphed into a snarl. “Ya hear me?” Polly nodded, and he strode back to his office.

Hannah took advantage of his absence to lay on her side. Polly sat next to her and stroked her hair. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it didn’t hurt near as much as I let on. Mama can do much worse with her strap when she sets her mind to it.” Hannah sniffed and wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

Polly started crying. “Oh, Mama is gonna be upset that we aren’t back with the thread yet. She had her heart set on winnin’ that quilt competition.” The tears spilled down her cheeks. “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. Nothing I do ever seems right.”

Hannah winced as she sat up to hug the distraught girl. “Shh, it’s okay, it’s not your fault. That ogre won’t keep us here but a minute. All the jerk really wanted was to feel up my butt.” She chuckled. “I’m sure he knows deep down that someday we women are gonna be able to wear whatever we want, where ever we want, regardless of what anyone thinks.”

Polly thought, *And we’re gonna do whatever we want too.*