

COWBOY CAVEAT



VANESSA BROOKS

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

PROLOGUE



“*A*my, go fetch some water from the river and take the little ones with you, please.”

“Yes, Pa. Tyler, Millie, come on now.”

“Can I take my fishing rod, Pa?”

“Sure thing, boy, catch us some fish for supper - Amy you keep a close eye out for Millie.”

“Sure thing, Pa!”

Daniel Campbell watched indulgently and smiled as his little brood of children ran off to the creek together. He was blessed with good kids, a new baby and a beautiful wife. Life was good.

“Daniel! Daniel!!”

He turned quickly at the warning cry from his wife, Suzie, and was shocked by the pain that seared his chest. Daniel looked down at the red stain spreading across his shirt in confusion. What the hell just happened?

Daniel fell to the ground without ever registering the man who stood by his wagon, holding a smoking gun.



IT WAS GETTING LATE when Amy led her brother and small sister back up from the river. Tyler had been lucky and had caught a couple of fish; Pa would know what they were. Millie was singing and swinging Amy's hand in time to the tune. Tyler lagged behind; he had wanted to stay longer, but Amy knew her stepmother would need the fresh water for making supper for them all.

When they arrived at the clearing where their wagon was pitched for the night, Amy stopped, puzzled. The contents of the wagon were strewn about the clearing, and her father was lying on the ground. He didn't look comfortable, and Amy knew something was very wrong. So did Millie, who began to cry.

Amy called Tyler to her and told him to hold Millie's hand and stay put until she called them. She walked hesitantly across the clearing to her father and knelt beside him.

There was a fly walking across his eye and he didn't even blink. Amy reached out a tentative hand and touched his face; it was cold. "Pa? Pa?" Amy whispered, but there was no response.

Amy stood up and wrapped both arms around herself tightly as she slowly walked behind the wagon. Her stepmother lay on the ground, her legs wide apart and her skirts covering her face. Amy's teeth had started to chatter and she was shaking badly. Gently, she lifted the skirt from her stepmother's face and then she wished she hadn't. Suzie Campbell had been a beautiful woman but whoever had left bruises around her neck had also rendered her face almost unrecognizable. Amy spun around and was violently sick.

What about Baby Luke? Where was the baby? Amy ran to the wagon and frantically searched for her six-month-old baby brother. She ran around the clearing looking for him and calling his name, but there was no answering cry. The baby was gone.



ED CAMPBELL SHADED his eyes against the hot sun. Was that them? It appeared to be a wagon, but he couldn't make out the folks driving it as yet.

He was marrying Ethan's sister Lucy on Sunday, and his pa, step-ma, sisters and brother were traveling over for the wedding. They should have arrived by now. They were cutting it fine. "You reckon it's your folks?" Ethan asked.

Ed glanced at his soon to be brother-in-law, but he couldn't see too much of the young man's face under the shadow of his hat. "Could be," he nodded. "Let's ride out and see." The two men mounted and turned their horses toward the incoming wagon.

"Well, I'll be... it's a dang parcel 'o kids!" Ethan exclaimed as the two men drew near enough to see who was driving the wagon.

Ed didn't speak but whipped up his horse and rode toward it at speed. Surprised, Ethan followed.

CHAPTER 1



EIGHT YEARS LATER

Ed Campbell walked in through the screen door and saw that his wife, Lucy, had put breakfast on the table. Their two small boys, his little sister, Millie, aged twelve, and his fourteen-year-old brother, Tyler, sat around the table eating.

Of his nineteen-year-old sister, Amy, there was no sign. Ed frowned. Amy was far too wild, and although he knew it, Ed couldn't seem to curb her free spirit. After what she'd been through as a child—well, he just couldn't bring himself to lay down the law.

"Hey darlin', where's Amy?" he asked after he'd kissed his wife's cheek and swiped a biscuit from the hot tray she held with a thick cloth. The tray was full of fresh baked biscuits straight out of the oven. Ed strode to the head of the table and sat in his chair, surrounded by his sons and young brother and sister who all chorused a greeting.

"Hi Pa!" "Hey Pa!" "Hi Ed!" echoed from all around the table. Lucy dished out biscuits to the hungry children, and in no time at

all, they were lathering the tops with thick yellow butter and devouring them greedily.

"I haven't seen her yet this morning," Lucy replied. "Her bed was empty when I looked in to wake her. Don't worry; she'll come in when she's hungry. How about you, are you starved after your early morning?"

"I am that, woman! It was a good start though... wouldn't you say?" Ed said as he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Edward Campbell!" Lucy could not get used to her husband's innuendo in front of their children and she flushed prettily as Ed had known she would. He chuckled delightedly since his ploy to make his wife blush had worked.

Lucy sat down, and to take her husband's mind off such an embarrassing subject as their early morning lovemaking, she brought up the subject of his sister again. "Well, at least Amy won't be your problem for much longer. Once she and my brother are wed, she'll be all his to fret about."

Ed frowned and chewed thoughtfully. "Hmm."

Lucy looked up and stared at her husband's pensive face. "Ed?"

"I jus' worry, honey, that Ethan will be too hard on Amy, yuh know? She needs her wild time after everything that happened to her."

Tyler gulped his mouthful of biscuit down and joined in the discussion about his sister. "Amy don't look it, but she's tough. Eth knows that and he knows her well enough to know how to quiet her down some."

"There... words of wisdom from my brother... we don't have to worry about Amy anymore darlin'!" Ed flung his arm out expansively and grinned at Tyler, who turned bright red.

"Gee, Ed! I'm gonna go out and look for her anyways." He pushed back his chair and made for the door.

"You're welcome!" called Lucy softly.

"Oh...yeah...um... thanks for breakfast, Luce," Tyler mumbled as he banged the screen door behind him. Ed grinned at Lucy as she

shook her head and smiled back. At least Tyler and Millie had suffered no real trauma after their parents were killed; it was Amy who held all the demons from that dreadful day tight within her.



AMY WAS on her way into town with six young steers for the stockyard. They would await collection from the U.S. Government men who bought stock from the Lazy Z for meat. The simplest way to get them there, in Amy's opinion, was to get them to follow Bellamy, their prize Hereford bull, hand reared by her.

Bellamy was an extremely docile animal and a king among beasts. Ed had purchased the calf from the renowned J.A. Ranch, which was responsible for importing the first Hereford cattle into the Panhandle in '83. The young steer followed their leader, and Amy rode him bare back. Strictly speaking, Amy wasn't supposed to be doing this task, but Max the foreman had other pressing things to do that day, namely dipping cattle to keep them free of the ticks that caused the 'Texas Fever' in the herds. Max had accepted Amy's offer to take them into town with some relief, and to be fair, he'd had no idea that she planned to go alone...let alone ride Bellamy bare back!

Ethan Walker, Lucy's older brother and now Amy's newly betrothed, was crossing the main street in town when he heard the bellow of cattle. He leaned against a post on the wooden sidewalk to watch the slow progress of the herd coming toward him. He couldn't see who was driving them yet because of the dust churned up by the steers' hooves. As the cloud of fine earth dropped from the air and the small herd got nearer, he stiffened and swore softly under his breath, *Land- sakes, it's Amy and riding a damned bull...bare back!* What the hell was the matter with Ed, allowing his kid sister to get away with this kind of thing? She could be killed or badly maimed if those critters got spooked! When Amy became his wife he wouldn't be allowing her to do this type of crazy thing anymore,

no siree! Amy would get her butt well and truly blistered for a stunt like this once she was Mrs. Ethan Walker. Ethan was going to have words with his fiancée and tell her in no uncertain terms that this type of behavior had to stop right now!

Amy waved cheerily at Ethan as she rode past and wondered what had happened to put such a scowl on his normally sunny and handsome face. She found out when she reached the depot and led the cattle into the stock pens.

Ethan reached up and pulled Amy off Bellamy's back. He signaled to the stockman to corral the steers and then pulled Amy round to face him, holding her by her upper arms.

"Does Ed know that you rode into town like this?" he asked, his brows slanted downward in a fearsome frown.

"I dunno...maybe," Amy mumbled evasively, trying to pull away from Ethan's grasp. Ethan shook her gently. "Look at me, Amy." She met his bright hazel eyes and sighed, feeling a lecture coming on. Ever since she'd agreed to marry Ethan, it seemed as if he did nothing but criticize her.

"Don't you sigh at me like that, gal! I tell you I am that *aggervated* with you right now, I'm of a mind to put you across my knee and give you the larruping you deserve! What are you thinking? Riding a bull is jus' plumb crazy! I warn you, Amelia Jane, once you are my wife, a stunt like this will definitely earn you one hell of a paddling - you hearing me, little girl?" Ethan gave her another little shake.

"Enough, okay? Gee, don't go gettin' yourself all bowed up, Eth. I get it, all right! Bellamy's as gentle as old Mr. Harris's flea-bit hound!"

Ethan growled and shook her again, "Bellamy is a doggone bull, dagnabbit, and easily spooked. He's unpredictable and weighs in at about twenty-seven hundred pounds! This is not negotiable, Amelia Jane. Anymore back-talk from you, and I will put you over my knee... got that!"

Amy scowled but nodded.

“Right. I’ve got the cart with me so we’ll ride home together and tether Bellamy to the back.”

Ethan started to stride off when he heard Amy mutter a soft expletive under her breath. He spun his surly fiancée around and walloped her rounded backside just the once. Amy jumped and glared back at him. “Ethan, we aren’t even married yet. You can’t *do* that!”

“No? Well I jus’ did.... an’ try me any further darlin’ and see what happens! Now quit yer jaw jackin an’ come along with me. We can catch the minister and set a date while we’re both in town.”

“Ethan, no! I’m not dressed to meet the minister today, look at me!” she wailed. Ethan looked and frowned.

Oh no, thought Amy, another lecture on the way!

“Humph. That’s another thing, Amy. After we’re wed, no more britches except on the ranch. I want my wife to be seen looking her best when we’re out, wearin’ pretty dresses an’ such.” Amy groaned and rolled her eyes. Ethan saw and gave another light swat to her swaying posterior, which, in Ethan’s opinion, was all too exposed in britches. Her butt and legs were on clear display within the tight boy trousers she’d pilfered from Tyler’s cupboard.

“Home – now!”

Ethan decided to get Amy out of town and out of sight as soon as he could. He was going to have some serious words with Ed when he got back to the Lazy Z.



AMY WRIGGLED through the long grass, her rifle cocked and ready. The rabbit sniffed the air and Amy carefully raised her gun to fire.

“Amy, where in blazes are you?” The bellow frightened the rabbit away and Amy cursed long and loud. What was the matter now! Why couldn’t everyone just leave her be! Again, that angry male voice. “Amelia Campbell, I’m warning you, git your hide

inside this minute!" Ed was trying to sound mad. Amy grinned to herself; Ed just couldn't do mad.

"Yup, okay, keep your hair on, Ed!" Amy knew that when her brother Ed called her Amelia he meant business – even if he wasn't angry. So Amy jumped up from the long grass, broke her rifle and hooked it over her arm. She sauntered up to her brother where he sat frowning on his horse, Major.

Ed glowered at his sister, "Where in tarnation have you bin all day?" Amy held up a bunch of rabbits as an answer. Ed took the rabbits and held his hand out to Amy. She gripped his forearm and swung herself up behind him with the ease of someone used to being on and around horses every day.

They didn't speak until they arrived at the ranch house and Ed set her down on the front stoop. "Get yourself cleaned up and put on a dress. We've got company for dinner and Lucy will need your help," Ed told her.

Amy sighed and muttered an oath; she hated 'company' and she hated anything to do with cooking or housework.

"I heard that!" Ed snapped.

"You were meant to. *Whose* company?" Amy asked.

Ed wheeled his horse and began to walk to the stables.

"You'll see!" Amy swore at him and banged the door as she went into the house. First thing she did was to go into the kitchen and kiss and hug her diminutive sister-in-law, Lucy. Lucy returned the hug but then held Amy away from her, frowning.

"Oh Amy, look at you! Go wash up and please do something with your hair, will you, we've company tonight!"

Amy reached over to the table and stuck her finger in the bowl of mix sitting there. "Mmm, pudding! Where are the boys?" she asked.

Ed and Lucy had two small boys named Ben and Nat. "They are upstairs with Millie getting cleaned up. Now shoo!" The door banged open and a young boy with an overlong thatch of dirty blond hair wandered in and went straight to the mixing bowl,

sticking his finger in the goo and then licking it appreciatively. "Tyler!" Lucy smacked his hand away from the apricot pudding. Tyler grinned and went to pour himself a cup of milk from the pitcher.

"I hear tell Ethan's comin' over," he said to no one in particular.

Amy, who was on her way out of the room, swung around with a frown. "Ethan? *He's* the darn 'company' tonight? You've *got* to be kidding me!"

"Now, Amy..." Lucy began.

"Amy, go clean up and watch your mouth!" Ed had come in quietly behind Tyler. He ruffled his brother's hair and added, "You wash up too, boy."

Amy stood and glared at her brother, "I knew it, you done stopped preaching and gone to meddlin'! I told you I ain't interested in marrying Ethan, not after the way he laid down the law in town this morning! I mean you no offense, Lucy, but that brother of yours is jus' a doggone bully!"

Lucy gave a half smile and turned her back on them; she had a meal to fix and it wouldn't cook itself. Thankfully Millie rushed into the kitchen and went straight to the apples and started to peel them. Lucy smiled at her little sister-in-law, she didn't know how she would cope with all the work around here if it wasn't for that darling little girl, well not so little, Millie was twelve now. Goodness, had it been eight years already since that dreadful day?

They had all thought that Amy would never recover; she didn't speak for almost a year after her parents' murder, and Ed and Lucy had decided to postpone their wedding to concentrate on helping the children through the shock. To lose their parents in that sudden and horrific way was too dreadful for words! They never did find baby Luke but they did find footsteps in the muddy riverbank and it was assumed that whoever had killed Daniel and Suzie, had thrown the baby in the river to drown. Lucy shivered; the horror of that day still raised goose bumps under her skin.

Lucy looked at Amy arguing with her brother. She was a real

beauty and she wasn't even aware of the effect she had on men. Her sherry golden eyes were flashing and her shiny caramel hair was a long, tangled curling mass bouncing with every shake of her head. Oh my, she was wild that one. Lucy hoped her brother Ethan knew what he was taking on with Amy. Why couldn't he be sweet on Jayne Littleton, the grocer's daughter? Jayne had been after Ethan since they were all at school together, but Ethan had not shown any interest in the pretty blonde girl. He and Amy had formed a bond that involved horses and cattle and he'd only had eyes for Amy, especially once she had grown into a beautiful young woman. They argued and disagreed more than they agreed, but the friendship had stayed strong.

Ethan mentioned marriage and then they had got engaged, but at some point Amy had closed herself off from Ethan and what she called his boring old lectures. Now she wouldn't talk properly to Ethan or even stay around to see him when he visited. Lucy had invited her brother to dinner in the hope that the young couple would sort things out between them.

Lucy banged a wooden spoon onto a pan and yelled into the escalating fight between her husband and his sister, "That's *enough*, y'all! Amy get on up stairs and wash up, put on a dress and come and help me, *NOW!*" The siblings stopped their squabbling and turned to look at Lucy. Amy nodded tersely and ran to do as she was told.

Ed looked sheepishly at his wife. "Sorry darlin', what can I do?"

"Go wash up an' put on a clean shirt and stop goading your sister and let her be. She is Ethan's problem now... *not ours!*"

"Lucy, we don't know that Amy will ever accept Ethan," Ed said as he turned to go.

But Lucy raised her voice so that her husband could hear her as he walked away. "Ethan is determined and Amy loves him. It will all work out just fine, you'll see!"