



# CROOKED CREEK

## RANCH



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

By Amy Drorbaugh

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# CHAPTER ONE

## THE TOMATO BATH

“Shhhh, you’re going to scare her away!”

Three little blonde heads peeked over the fallen tree; six little grubby hands rested on the rough bark of the old oak. Tommy motioned for his brother and sister to stay down. At ten years old, he was the designated leader of the group and technically in charge of the younger kids. Every time they left the ranch house to play in the California hills surrounding their cattle ranch, Ma would call out, “Keep an eye on the littles!” And he tried his best, but everyone knew

it was tiny six-year-old Sara, with her wild curls and dancing eyes, who was the real boss. The two brothers adored their little sister because she always came up with the best ideas for playing. In fact, she was the reason they were all hiding behind the old dead tree.

The three Smith children had all been sitting on the bank of the creek that ran through their back pasture and gave their ranch its name—Crooked Creek Ranch. The stream wound its way back and forth across their entire spread. During the spring the creek would swell with snow runoff and race through the meadow, but now in early fall, it was reduced to a slow trickle, only two feet across. Tommy had been making little boats out of sticks and leaves and sailing them in the slow water. Eight-year-old Levi had been digging a hole in the bank as it slowly filled

up with cold muddy water, while Sara lazily watched the cows grazing in the lower pasture. Looking up, Tommy noticed the sun had started to dip into the tree line on the mountain that formed the western half of the canyon they called home. He was thinking it was time to start back when Sara suddenly yelled out, “Look! Look over there!”

Sara pointed downstream toward the dirt road that snaked around trees and boulders and led out of their canyon. Tommy and Levi stood up to see what she was so excited about. They both gasped when they saw where she was pointing.

There she was, under the old oak tree with the low branches that brushed the ground—a big mama skunk. And right behind her, in a line, were three roly-poly, fluffy little skunk babies.

“Aren’t they so cute!” squealed Sara, clapping her hands together. “Let’s catch them!”

“Catch them?” Tommy frowned. He looked again at the setting sun. It would be dark soon, and Ma would be looking for them to come home.

“Yes! There are three of them and three of us; we could each keep one for our own special pet.” Without waiting for either reply or agreement, Sara crouched down and started sneaking toward the mama skunk. “C’mon, and keep quiet.”

Levi, always ready to follow Sara into fun—adventure or trouble—immediately bent over and followed his little sister. Tommy hesitated, looking again at the reddish sky. He knew from experience that getting Sara to change her mind would be hard, and the idea of a small soft baby skunk for his very own was too exciting to resist.



He shrugged his shoulders and crept quickly after the others toward the fallen tree. The old dead tree had been leaning all year long and had finally fallen over during the last big storm. Soon, Pa and the uncles would come out with their axes and saws and cut it up to use for firewood over the cold winter, but for now it made the perfect hiding spot for three small children.

Tommy peered over the log to judge how far away the skunks were. Unaware of the fate being planned for them, the four black-and-white animals were snuffling around the base of the tree, looking for earthworms or berries to eat. If things worked out, they might even find a lizard. Skunks love lizards.

Tommy sank back down behind the log and took charge. “Here’s what we’ll do: Sara, you go down around that end of the log, and Levi, you



sneak the other way. We need to get as close as we can before they see us. Once we are super close, we can each grab one and then run before the mama skunk sprays us.”

Sara nodded, her tongue caught between her teeth as she concentrated on the baby skunk she wanted. Levi peered over the log and blurted out, “I want the one with the big, bushy tail!”

But he spoke too loudly. The mother skunk looked up, alert to the sudden danger. She let out a funny squeal and started herding her babies toward the protection of a pile of boulders. She could move surprisingly fast.

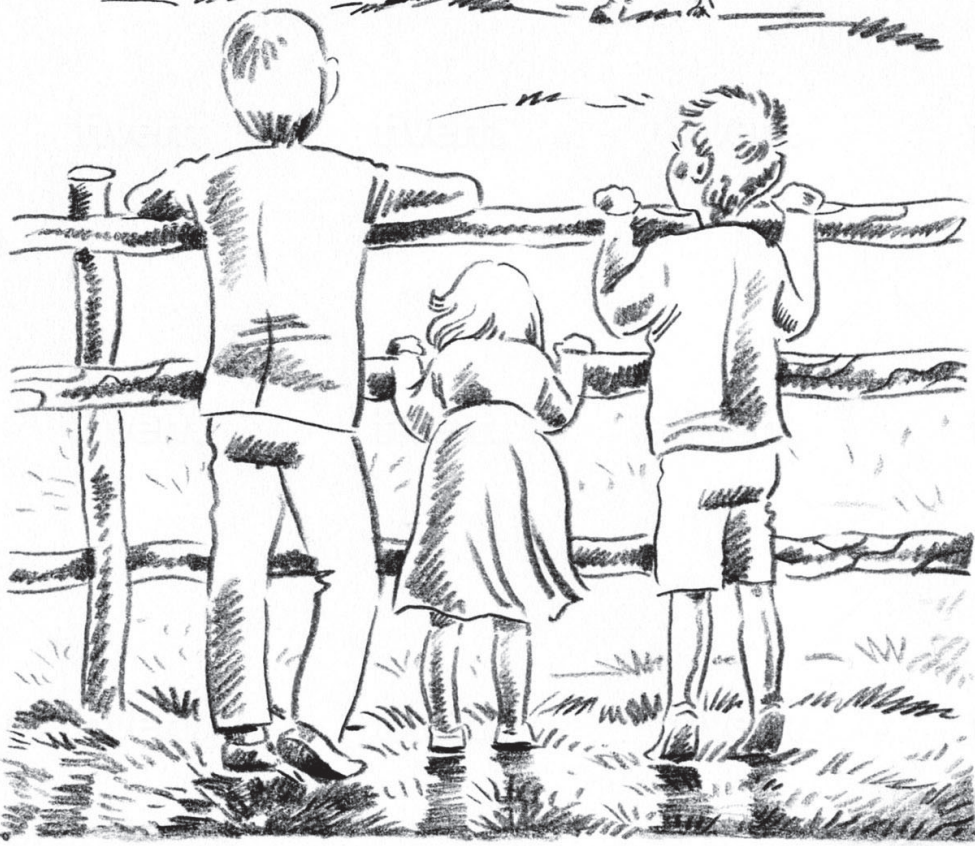
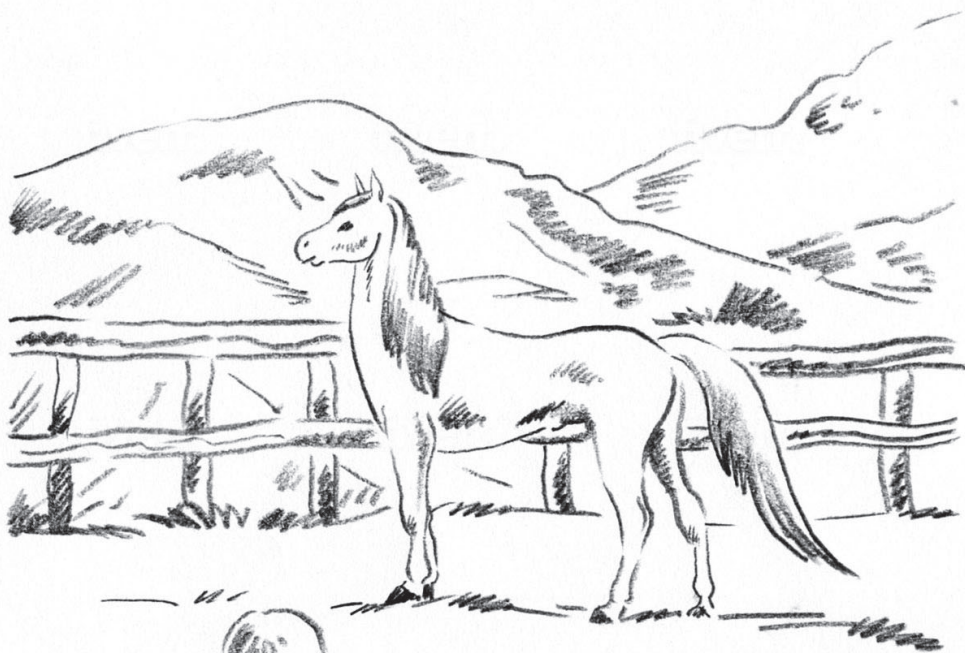
“They’re getting away!” Sara howled and charged around the end of the log. “Get ’em!” Levi was right on her heels, whooping a battle cry.

Helplessly, Tommy watched as Levi and Sara

both ran after the fleeing skunks. The mama skunk, seeing the two children coming, hissed angrily and dashed for the rocks. Reaching the pile, she shoved her babies into a small gap between two large rocks, pushing them in with her nose. She turned around, and right as the children came within range, she raised her tail, aimed, and fired her most effective weapon.

Levi, who was in front, took the brunt of the first spray, but Tommy and Sara, catching up, got well covered by the second spray. All three children started coughing and gagging as the stench filled the air around them, sticking to their clothes, skin, and hair. Sara was the first to recover, brushing aside the incident and focusing on the prize. She wanted that skunk baby.

“C’mon, she already sprayed us; let’s grab the babies and run.”





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There she was ... a big mama skunk. And right behind her, in a line, were three roly-poly, fluffy little skunk babies.

“Aren’t they so cute!” squealed Sara, clapping her hands together. “Let’s catch them!”



**T**here's never a dull moment when you live on an isolated cattle ranch in the hills of Southern California. Tag along with Sara, Levi, and Tommy as they have hilarious and fun adventures. Based on true events from the childhood of the author's mother, these heart-warming stories reveal a glimpse into rural life in the early 1900s and focus on the unbreakable bond of family.

■ ORIGINAL PUBLICATION



  
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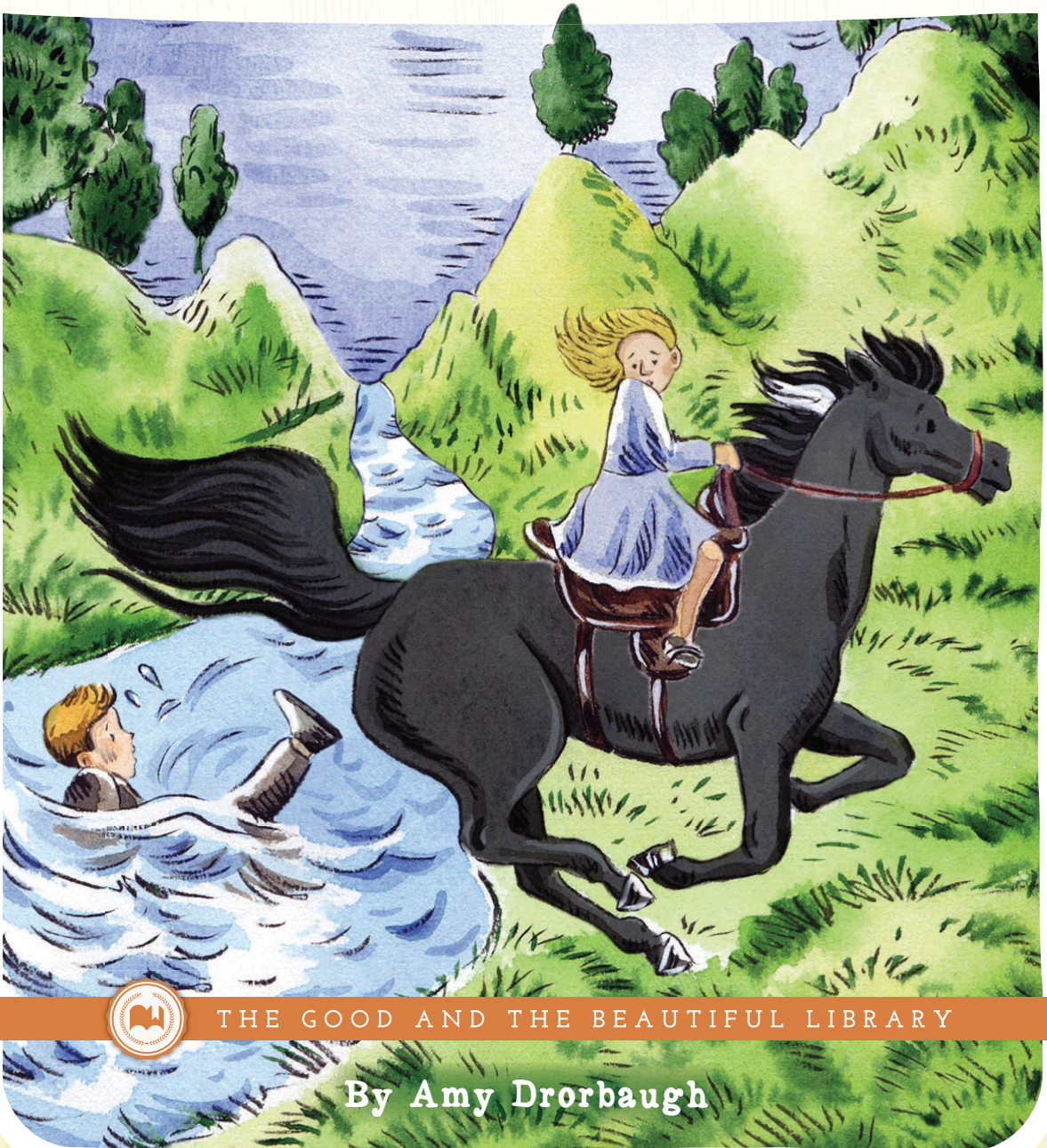
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# CROOKED CREEK RANCH AND THE GREAT FLOOD



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# CHAPTER ONE

## SARA'S FIRST RIDE

“Sara, you can’t learn to ride a horse with your eyes closed.”

“How do you know I have my eyes closed? You can’t see them, no how,” Sara said pertly from her seat in the large saddle. She didn’t dare open her eyes or turn around to look at her brother Tommy, who was perched behind her. Her little hands gripped the leather reins so tightly that her knuckles were as white as her face.

“I thought you wanted to learn how to ride?” Tommy asked with a laugh.

“Storm didn’t look this tall from down on the ground,” Sara whispered, taking a quick peek down and then closing her eyes again quickly.

“Old Storm is as gentle as they come,” Tommy reassured her, “and I’m right here behind you. I won’t let you fall.”

“Promise?”

Tommy leaned forward and wrapped his arms around little Sara’s waist. “Promise for sure!”

Sara took a deep breath and tightened her hold on the reins. Storm, a black mare with a single white stripe in her mane, stood



patiently, flicking her ears at wayward flies. She was a twenty-year-old mare, and both Levi and Tommy had learned to ride on her back. Nothing bothered the placid old horse. The three of them were standing in the south meadow, just below the creek, and standing was pretty much all they did. They hadn't moved one step since Tommy and Sara had mounted ten minutes ago.

Sara's first riding lesson was happening under a dark and cloudy sky. It seemed as if the skies were always dark and cloudy this winter, but at least it wasn't raining again. Tommy never thought he would be tired of rain, but this winter he would give anything for just one sunny day.

Sara slowly cracked open one eye. The ground still looked very far away. Scared, Sara leaned forward in the saddle and squeezed her legs tight around Storm's belly. At this signal Storm, who was a very well-trained horse, started walking forward. Sara squealed, dropped the reins, and grasped the saddle horn with both hands.

“Make her stop, Tommy! Make her stop!”

“Whoa, girl,” Tommy said cheerfully, leaning around Sara to grab the reins. Obediently Storm came to a stop, not at all upset by the squealing girl on her back. Tommy handed the reins back to Sara.

“It's all right, Sara! Storm just thought you wanted her to walk. When you want her

to stop, tell her 'whoa,' lean back, and pull lightly on the reins. When you want her to go, click your tongue, lean forward, and squeeze her with your knees. Go ahead and try it."

From the front porch of the ranch house, Mama kept one eye on the riding lesson while she shelled the last of the fall peas. Her other eye was on eight-year-old Levi, who was currently seated at the kitchen table struggling to finish his math sums. Mama smiled at the dark head bent over his work, knowing how much Levi would rather be out with Sara and Tommy.

As Mama turned her attention back to the meadow, a thin beam of sunlight broke

through the clouds and lit up the two children on the dark horse. Sara was only six, with her messy blonde curls and her determination to do everything her brothers did. Tommy was almost eleven now, and sometimes Ma could see the man he would someday be, hiding behind his green eyes and freckles. He rode Storm easily, even perched as he was behind the saddle on Storm's wide back. After their rough start, Mama could see Sara now directing Storm to walk, stop, and turn. Tommy was a good teacher.

A raindrop landed in Mama's blue glass bowl alongside the small mountain of green peas. Ma sighed. The strange, unseasonable

rains just kept falling this year. It had done nothing but rain for the last month, and if it didn't stop soon, they would lose their winter crop. The warm temperatures and lack of snow in Southern California meant that most farmers could plant crops year round. The winter crops provided a valuable food and money source for the local farmers. Generally rain was a blessing in this sunny climate, but this constant rain was strange and worrisome. She stood up to go back inside.

“Tommy,” she called out and saw his head turn toward her. “Time to come in. It's lookin' to rain again.”

Tommy waved back to let Ma know he had

heard, and told his sister, “All right, Sara, it’s time to go in.”

“Aww, but I was just figgerin’ it out!” Sara complained as she reined Storm to a slow stop. “Why don’t you take us back to the barn, then?” Tommy suggested.

“Across the creek? Really?”

Without waiting for Tommy’s answer, Sara used her newfound skill to turn Storm toward the creek and awkwardly moved her to a slow walk. The creek ran the whole length of their property, wandering back and forth across the meadows and down the canyon. Its crooked path gave their ranch its name: Crooked Creek Ranch. Normally it was not a large creek, and even small Sara

could walk across it in most places. However, the constant rain had swollen it to twice its normal size, and as it grew, it picked up speed as well. Now the creek measured about eight feet across and swirled darkly in the middle. Old Storm, reaching the edge of the water, snorted and came to a stop.

“What’s wrong, girl?” Sara patted her neck. “It’s just the creek.”

“She’s just nervous because it’s bigger than normal, I reckon,” Tommy said. “She’ll be fine. Just give her a little kick like I taught you, with your heels.”

Sara tapped Storm’s side with her small heels, but the old mare didn’t react at all.

“I’ll do it,” Tommy said and smartly kicked

his heels. At the exact same moment, a giant crash of thunder sounded right above them.

Sara jerked on the reins in surprise.

Startled by the kick, the pull, and the thunder all at once, gentle Storm reared up onto her hind legs and then bolted across the creek with a toss of her mane.

Tommy, with his precarious seat behind the saddle and nothing to hold on to, slid right off the back of Storm, over her tail. He didn't even have time to yell before he landed with a hard *plop* and a cold *splash* in the freezing creek!

Up to his neck in the cold waters, Tommy watched Storm, with Sara still on her back, run all the way back to the barn. Sara had







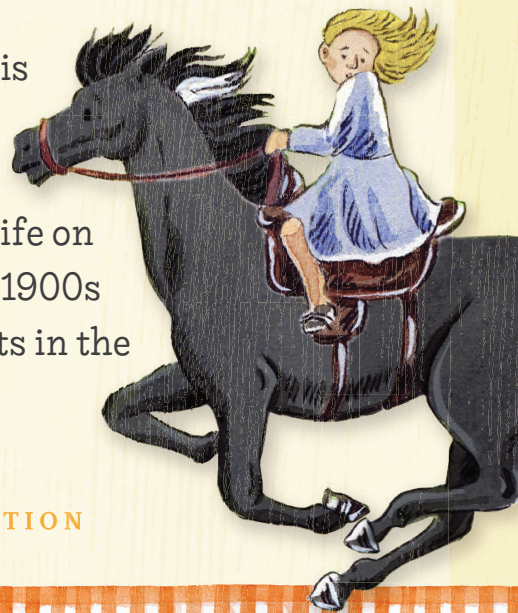
# CROOKED CREEK RANCH AND THE GREAT FLOOD

“Ma! Look what I found,” she said as she burst into the kitchen. . . . “I couldn’t find any flowers, but I picked these beautiful leaves instead.”

Ma looked up with a smile that quickly turned into a gasp of horror. “Sara! What did you do?!”



**T**he Smiths of Crooked Creek Ranch are back again with a brand-new set of family adventures! Crooked Creek is rising fast from the unusual, never-ending rain. How high will it get? Come along and experience life on a working cattle ranch in the early 1900s through stories based on true events in the lives of the author’s mother and grandparents.



 ORIGINAL PUBLICATION