



BOOK
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CROOKED CREEK RANCH



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

By Amy Drorbaugh

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter One: The Tomato Bath.....</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>Chapter Two: The Bear and the Soap.....</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>Chapter Three: The Mystery of the Open Gate.....</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Chapter Four: Festival Preparations.....</i>	<i>57</i>
<i>Chapter Five: Root Beer Catastrophe.....</i>	<i>77</i>

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

Crooked Creek Ranch

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

The Tomato Bath

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

The Tomato Bath

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.

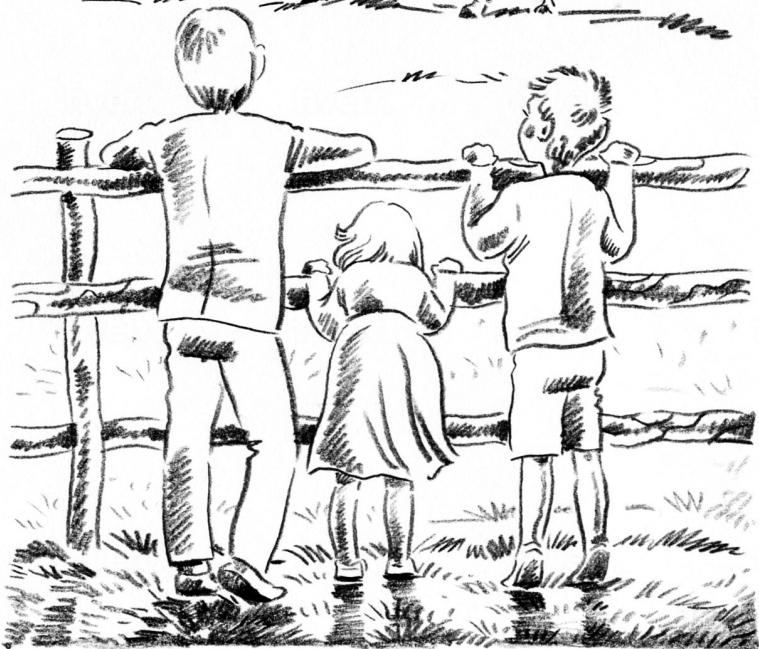
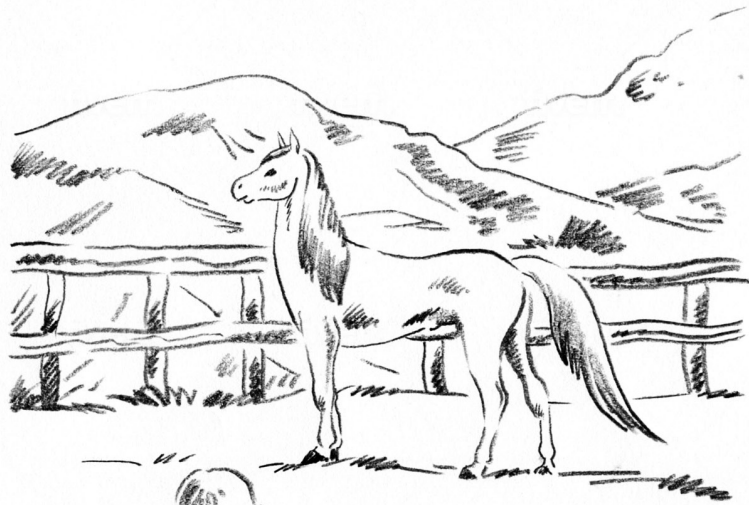
“They’re getting away!” Sara howled and charged around the end of the log. “Get ’em!” Levi was right on her heels, whooping a battle cry.

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.

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There'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.

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