

# THE GENTLEMAN COWBOY



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Published by Blushing Books  
An Imprint of  
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.  
A Virginia Corporation  
977 Seminole Trail #233  
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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eBook ISBN: 978-1-63954-339-7

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

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.

## CHAPTER 1



1897, New York City

"*H*e wore a cowboy hat to dinner..." her friend paused for dramatic effect, then whispered, "...at the Dover's," naming a family who—like the one whose hospitality they were all enjoying this evening—was the epitome of New York City's high society.

"Surely, not in the house?"

"No, but he gave it to their butler, Robbins. Can you imagine, a cowboy hat among all of those top hats? I'll bet the poor old man had no idea what to do with it!"

"One has to wonder whether he wore the boots to complete the ensemble!" Melody couldn't help but snicker at her friend's juicy tidbit of gossip as well as her own contribution, although she put her hand over her mouth when she did it.

Still, she got a singeing glare from her mother. Proper young ladies didn't snicker, regardless of the provocation, certainly not at dinner—and most especially not at a dinner at which one was a guest of the Shea family, for Heaven's sake. She could hear her mother's voice chiding her in her head.

But Melly found her mother's consternation with her behavior disingenuous in the extreme. It wasn't as if she—herself—didn't snicker derisively and frequently. She just did it quietly to herself, or perhaps just loud enough for her "friend", Theresa Dornan, to hear, so that she, too, could snort barely loudly enough to register to anyone but them.

Somehow, the two of them always managed to sit disturbingly close together, whether it was on the settees on the edges of a ball-room or at the dinner table, as they were now. She wasn't exactly sure why that thought bothered her every time it popped into her head, but it did.

"May I ask what it is that you find so amusing, Miss Kane?"

Barnabas Wraithe, sitting—or rather leaning—to her left, bent his sallow, yellowish-white-haired head down towards her, and it was all she could do not to lean dramatically away from him. But she knew that her eagle-eyed mother wouldn't miss it if she did, so she resigned herself to being bathed in his boozy breath, as well as the smell of whatever medicine it was that he slathered on unthinkable parts of his body—which was to say *any* part of his body—she assumed to deal with the pain of the rheumatism of which he always seemed to complain. But that wasn't even the worst of it—not by far. Mr. Wraithe was easily old enough to be her father—practically her grandfather. She was just recently eighteen, and she would have been willing to bet that it had been at least that long since he had bathed, and longer since he had seen a dentist. His breath was absolutely fetid, turning her stomach with every cruel, breathy word he uttered.

"Something amusing Miss Cornell mentioned. Nothing of any import, Mr. Wraithe, I assure you."

He smiled, and she wholeheartedly wished he wouldn't. Every time his lips drew back, he revealed the horrifying condition of his teeth.

"Oh, but if it amuses you, my dear, then it would be a matter of great importance to me, I assure you," he replied in the oily manner

he apparently thought she'd find attractive. The other possibility was that he didn't really care what she thought of him, relying on the size of his checkbook, and her mother's need to sell her off to the highest bidder, to inveigle his way into her life—and her bed.

The cold, hard truth Melody had learned during her first season out was that money and power trumped pretty much everything else in her world—their world. Anything could be forgiven in a potential suitor if his purse was big enough. Even for someone who liked to consider herself well-grounded in reality—certainly more so than the majority of her friends—as Melly did, the thought was a truly sobering one.

The older she got, the more she realized just how little control she had over the disposition of her own life. Right now, her mother was in control of her future—her comfort, her health, her possessions—her life. And Ramona Kane was all too eager to pass her off to a filthy rich husband, who would then control every and all aspects of her life.

Just as she was beginning to fall into despair, though, when that horrible old man leaned down again to say something to her, she was saved by the appearance of the very man she and Alice Broward had been snickering about moments ago.

He breezed into the dining room—all six foot four of his imposing yet somehow, at the same time, lithe self. And without so much as meeting anyone's gaze, he crossed immediately to their hostess, bowing deeply to her before reaching out to capture the hand she was holding to her chest—as if she were going to swoon—to bring the back to his lips. That prompted a wave of soft titters and distinctly envious "ohs," mostly from the married women there, but she was surprised to hear Alice doing the same thing.

And when he spoke, every female in the room—yes, even her mother and Miss Dornan, Melody thought—sighed romantically, not really even bothering to try to hide it.

She, of course, did not. She'd heard more than enough about that man, and she didn't like any of it, regardless of the fact that he

seemed to have the entire ton of New York City—among whom there were some who could not be discounted as fools—under his spell.

The man smiled broadly through his entire *mea culpa*, which Melody found extremely distasteful and downright vulgar, for no real reason. "I must proffer my deepest apologies for my lateness, Mrs. Shea. I was busy breaking a horse."

A footman pulled out a chair—which was conveniently to the blushing older woman's left—and he took it, murmuring, "Thank you," to the young man as he did so. Melody hated that she liked that he'd done that. Recognizing the contributions that servants made to one's life was not something that was done often enough—or, frankly, at all—by the majority of the privileged rich who employed them and relied on them in so many ways. She made a point of doing it herself, to her mother's displeasure, hoping that the behavior would catch on.

So far, she'd failed spectacularly at that effort, but if anyone could get these stuffed shirts and their imperious, snobby wives to adopt the habit, it was he, apparently. He held them in his thrall effortlessly, by means of being the unabashed novelty that he was to them.

"Surely, you jest, Mr. Worth! Why, where would you find an unbroken horse in New York City?" Mrs. Shea tittered, folding and unfolding her fan over her prodigious bosom as if she were a coquette and not an overly plump woman with three children, who had been married for over twenty years.

Even at her tender age and with her lack of experience with men, Melly could tell that his lopsided grin and self-deprecating tone—that nonetheless was so deep that it sounded exactly as if he were a big, purring cat, a panther or jaguar, no doubt—were no accident. He meant to charm those who surrounded him, in order to make them forget that he possessed sharp claws and fangs. "Well, perhaps 'breaking' wasn't the right word. But I did pick up a beautiful piece of horseflesh, the purchase of which was

what caused me to be late, for which I hope all of you will forgive me."

He had a slight drawl, but nothing terribly pronounced, and it only added to his attractiveness if the star-struck looks he was getting from the other females in the room were anything to judge by.

Then she watched as he met the eyes of everyone at the table—save her, again. She saw what was coming and decided that the napkin in her lap was of particular interest to her when they might have locked eyes.

From that point on, she did her best not to look at him, just out of a fit of pique. And it wasn't an easy thing to do, especially when she was one of the ones who was introduced to him by their host. She didn't think anyone would notice that when she nodded in his direction, murmuring his name, she wasn't actually looking at him, but rather past him, to the polished silver fire irons next to the fireplace.

She wasn't sure why she'd taken such an instant dislike of him. If anything, she should have liked him for knocking their staid, proper, stifling society off its axis a bit by being different. Was that how she liked to consider herself, although not quite so daring, perhaps? She'd never quite fit the constricting mode of the social strata to which she had been born and had chafed against it all her life.

Then why couldn't she seem to accept this man as a kindred spirit of sorts? Likely, she was merely being contrary and stubborn, rejecting anything the rigid matrons—of which her mother was one—seemed so eager to embrace.

But of course, they would—he was a man. He could do pretty much as he pleased—drinking, whoring, gambling and worse—and be forgiven, as long as he married well, provided lavishly for his wife and children, attended church, and was discreet about his inevitable affairs.

All while she'd been kept locked away, treated as a mere child

who couldn't think for herself, until this year. And now, when she was finally allowed a slight bit of freedom, the only way she was allowed to use it was in pursuit of an acceptable man.

Melly sighed, feeling put upon and discontent with her lot in life all over again.

He'd only missed the first course—the fresh oysters—and was just in time for the seven onion soup, with the puff pastry top, for which the Shea's' chef was quite famous. When the soups were placed on the chargers in front of them, she was surprised to see that the usual strict manners of those around her seemed to have been abandoned in favor of everyone wanting to talk to that man at once, instead of looking to the hostess to see whether or not to turn from right to left.

And to her great shock and embarrassment, it was her own mother who led the rebels! "I've heard that you have a ranch in the southwest somewhere, Mr. Worth?"

"I do, Mrs. Kane. I run a herd of longhorn cattle in Texas, north of San Antonio, and I have some pretty fine quarter horses, too," he said modestly.

"Quarter horses? What are the other three quarters comprised of—mule?" Wraith felt compelled to needle the newcomer, to take him down a peg or two, as if he thought that the younger man was his competition. And indeed, he was, for every other female at the table save the one he was most after, although it hadn't even occurred to him to notice that about her.

Unfortunately, his attempt flopped, since the object of his jibe didn't take it as such. Everyone at the table laughed at his quip, but no one more loudly than Worth himself, damn him.

"There are times, I'd grant you, Mr. Wraith, that I would have wholeheartedly agreed with you about their lineage. Why, I had a stallion one time..."

As much as she loved horses, she did not want to fall under this man's spell, so Melly did her best to ignore what he was saying,



which was damned hard to do when everything he said seemed to make his audience laugh.

"So I told him to pull, and he pulled me right into one side—and up the other—of a pond that was little more than a deep swamp. It's a damned good thing I can hold my breath for a long time, or I would have been done for." She'd never heard any of the people who were at the table with her laugh that loudly in her life—while she stubbornly refused to. And he just kept spinning his yarn. "When I could come up for air, with a mouth full of swamp grasses, he was standing on the shore, looking down at me with great disdain while he munched casually on my best Stetson as if it were made of hay." More uproarious mirth poured from his adoring fans, while she only frowned. "Sheila, my housekeeper, never did get those stains out of my work shirts. I think they're safely in the rag bag at the moment, so at least I got some further use of them—including the hat!"

The man obviously had absolutely no idea of what constituted polite dinner table conversation, and he was hopelessly out of touch with his audience. There wasn't a man at the table who owned a "work shirt", referred to any of his servants by their first names—or even knew what they were—or knew what a "rag bag" was. She'd be willing to bet that none of the women knew what any of those things were, either.

The one good thing Melly could say about the arrival of Mr. Harden Worth was that he managed to enchant even the man who considered him a rival for her affections. She didn't have to smell his breath or tolerate his lecherous looks for the rest of the meal.

Perhaps she was being too critical of him.

They split at the end of the meal, the women going through to the drawing room while the men stayed behind to drink port and smoke cigars.

"Isn't he just amazing?"

"He certainly is handsome!"

"I think I feel the need to move to Texas if they're all like that down there."

Of course, all of her friends—well, the two who were with her that night—were swooning ridiculously over him. Melly tolerated it as long as she could, but after twenty minutes or so and the topic of conversation remained immovable, she excused herself to the powder room.

That wasn't where she ended up going, but no one would need to know that. Instead, she visited her favorite room in the sixty-five room house that the Sheas called, without the slightest bit of irony, The Cottage—the library. The first Shea to amass the family fortune had built the house not long after the Revolution, when it was the first on what would become a very fashionable street. Besides being a very successful businessman, he was a man of letters, who amassed such a large library that it was rumored to be bigger, even, than the city's library, at that time. It was rumored to be housed in a room that was larger than their ballroom.

She had had the pleasure of being in both, and the ballroom, however splendid it was, was definitely smaller. Unfortunately, no one in the current generation of the family was a bibliophile, especially as Mrs. Shea hadn't produced a son and heir, and proper young ladies like their daughter, Prudence, were highly discouraged from becoming too bookish. Melly was pretty sure that she was the only person who ever went into the library, save the servants who had to clean it, which she considered to be a terrible shame.

Knowing that her mother wouldn't likely miss her for some time and that she was equally unlikely to be discovered, Melly drank deeply of that delightful "book scent", marveling at all of her choices in what to read much more so than she ever had in regards to choosing a suitor. Then she settled onto her favorite divan with an exquisitely decorated small lamp on the exquisitely decorated table providing just the right amount of light, and dove into one of her favorite stories—The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

"What are you reading?"

The question came out of nowhere, asked at the same time as someone reached down to her lap and tore the book away from her. She continued to hold on to it, which caused the page she was reading to rip.

She recognized that voice, as much as she wished she didn't, and stood, bringing the ridiculous differences in their sizes into sharp relief. Still, she gazed up at him, rose onto her tiptoes, and cracked her hand across his face.

"Do you see what you did with your ham-handedness, Mr. Worth? You've torn the page almost entirely out of it!" she yelled. She'd never yelled at anyone in her life, except perhaps, on very rare occasions, her little sister. She'd never raised her voice to an adult—and this man was most definitely that. Melly had never even yelled at a servant, and yet here she was, haranguing a man who looked like he could squash her—top down—with a well-placed foot!

The little termagant was positively incensed. And while he applauded her commitment to literacy—it was one he truly wished he saw more of in the women he had met lately, most of whom only seemed capable of the smallest of small talk. Anything beyond the weather and gossip, he was sure, of which he was likely a topic himself—and they were beyond their limited education.

Still, despite the fact that he, too, considered every book to be a priceless treasure, she had struck him, and Harden—Hard, to his friends—knew that he couldn't simply let that go. If she were a man, he would have demanded satisfaction in the ring for such an insult.

As she was undoubtedly not a man, he did with her what he knew his father had done with his little sister, and what he had done himself, on the rare occasion when a woman overstepped her bounds, to his mind. Harden sat down on the end of the ridiculously tiny divan—the thought that it might not support his weight

dismissed immediately—then he tugged her over his lap long before she knew what he intended.

The first thought that came into Melody's mind was that he was horribly rude to sit down without seeing her seated first, but that priggish thought was quickly abandoned once he grabbed her wrist and she ended up in a position she could never have come up with in a thousand years. Her mother thought she was flighty and fanciful, with entirely too much dreamy imagination for a girl, but it was beyond even her fertile mind!

She was wearing clothes that were, of course, the latest in fashion for that season, which meant that she had a bustle, which he made short work of while adeptly avoiding those flailing hands that meant him much more harm now than they had when they'd connected with his cheek.

Still, she needed to be taught that she shouldn't go around slapping men—especially men she didn't know, or she might end up in a much worse situation, instead of just getting her behind warmed by him.

Harden debated, only for a second, about taking down her bloomers but decided not to. He didn't want to traumatize her, just teach her a lesson, and he was very aware of the need for speed and efficiency, too, lest they be discovered.

So as soon as he'd moved the skirt of her dress out of the way, he began to lay into her with a palm that was much tougher than the palm of any man in that dining room, and that hand was attached to an arm with well-defined muscles. Unlike the rest of the population of the city, it seemed, at least those with whom he was expected to consort, he actually worked for a living, and his hands—his entire body—showed it. They weren't lily white, and they weren't baby's bottom soft, either. There were scars and calluses and even burn marks from working with barbed wire, pounding in fence posts, chopping wood, and branding cattle.

Melody yelped sharply at the first swat, clapping her hand over her mouth immediately. That helped her to remain—almost—

quieter through the rest of them, although she never managed to be completely silent. Each deliberately sharp and powerful smack rendered her breathless from the sting, and slap upon slap built a terrible burning that was driving her mad! If her hand hadn't been over her mouth, Melly knew that he would already have reduced her to screaming and crying and begging him to stop.

She couldn't believe that he was doing this to her! No man had ever dared to touch her beyond kissing the back of her hand, yet here he was, man-handling her as if he had every right to discipline her so intimately, like she was some streetwalking trollop!

But nothing angered her more than the fact that she could not find a method to get away from him. He seemed to anticipate everything she tried, blocking her as if she were advertising to him every option that came into her head.

So she was forced to remain there, lying ignominiously over his lap, embarrassed beyond words and frustrated beyond measure while her poor backside took the worst of it, each of the resounding smacks she received echoing in the near silence of the huge room.

Melly found herself lifted onto her feet with as much advance knowledge as she'd ended up over his lap. Suddenly, she was just there, and she stumbled a little, trying not to end up leaning on him, but she didn't have a choice.

Harden's arms came out to hold her up as he looked down at her. "Are you all right, Miss Kane?"

Her bottom was throbbing, her cheeks were so hot, she thought they were going to combust, and she wanted nothing more than to be left alone, so she could—not sink down onto the divan, because that would likely be uncomfortable now—but stand and cry her eyes out. But she still had to go back to the drawing room.

Melly opened her mouth to answer him sarcastically, nonetheless.

Then her eyes landed on the book and its defaced page.

She hadn't cried at her spanking, which he wasn't surprised

about, since it was quite hurried and less stringent than if he'd had the time and they were in a safe place where he could take the time to correct her more thoroughly. But the sight of a ripped page in a book she didn't even own, had tears spilling down her cheeks.

Melly picked up the book to inspect the damage, and Harden felt as if—as far as she was concerned—he might as well have not been there, for all the attention she was allotting him.

He watched her bite her lip, that beautiful face contorted into a deep frown. "I wonder if I could have it fixed and brought back here without the Sheas knowing..." she mused to herself.

Again, she found him taking the book from her hands, albeit much more carefully that time. Harden made certain that the torn page was safe, closed it, and tucked it under his arm. "As I am the cause of the problem, I shall see that it's rectified."

"What if they notice that it's gone in the meantime?"

He held up the spine of the book, away from the both of them, and blew on it. A cloud of dust rose from it. "Somehow, I don't think that's going to be a problem. The Sheas do not strike me as a reading family."

She grimaced at the waste, as she always did, but it wasn't as if she didn't know that already. She nodded. What he was suggesting was only right.

"I'll have it repaired and I'll invite myself to tea some day when it's done and slip in and put it back where it belongs, which is..." he asked, leading her into telling him.

"Right there."

"And no one need be the wiser."

Suddenly aware of the fact that she was alone with this man—a man who had already taken liberties that he shouldn't with her person—Melly replied, "I would be amenable to that, I suppose."

Her eyes darted to his face at the exact moment he was smiling in an indulgent manner that let her know he was laughing at her pomposity but was too polite to do so out loud, surprisingly.

"Would you leave, please? I need to get back to the ladies, and it

wouldn't do for anyone to notice that you and I were gone at the same time."

"I suppose not," he said with surprising reluctance. When he was at the door, Harden turned back to her. "May I call on you of an afternoon some time, Miss Kane?"

"No, you may not," she returned immediately but without rancor, as if she wasn't even still angry with him but had utterly dismissed him from her mind as if he were someone that she need not concern herself with.

His assessment could not have been further from the truth of what was going through her mind at that moment, and as soon as the words were out of her mouth, Melody wondered if he was going to make her regret them in the same way as she regretted slapping him—sort of.

Luckily, all he did was chuckle softly and leave her alone—thankfully.

She sank down onto the divan as if she didn't have the strength to hold herself up any longer. And she didn't—indeed, her legs, as well as the rest of her, were shaking with reaction at what had just happened to her, although she did pop back up again, as she'd thought she would, because her rear end wasn't happy with even her slight weight on it.

Melly couldn't believe any of it. If she'd had more to drink, she'd chalk it up to some kind of waking delusion, but she wasn't that lucky.

No, it had happened. It had happened to her—the man whom every other woman, single, married, widowed, or otherwise—seemed to want, and to whom she had absolutely no ties, had spanked her quite thoroughly. He'd agreed with her to perpetrate a bit of a ruse on one of society's best families, which did bind them together a bit. But worst of all, she had resoundingly denied—off handedly, without the slightest thought—his polite inquiry as to whether or not she would receive him, even though her backside was still throbbing in time with her pulse.

She waited longer than she probably needed to, but she didn't want to run into him again. When she found her way back to the drawing room, the men had rejoined them. Melly marched straight over to her mother to bend down and whisper something into her ear.

"Are you sure, dear?" her mother whispered back rather urgently. "Even though Mr. Worth is here?"

She clenched her jaw to the point of pain. "Especially because Mr. Worth is here, Mama. I have a splitting headache, and his ridiculous drawl gets on my very last nerve. I'll have French bring me home and then come back with the carriage."

Melly made her way to where Mr. and Mrs. Shea were standing together by the mantle. Social convention required that she thank her hosts, despite who was standing with them at the moment. It was just her luck.

But she ignored him, at least at first. "Mr. and Mrs. Shea, thank you so much for the wonderful meal. It was an evening I'll never forget, but I'm afraid that I've developed a horrible headache," she said, turning to pin Harden with her gaze as he stood there smiling softly down at her, as if he hadn't just thrashed her butt with the very hand that was now patting her arm sympathetically.

"My dear, I'm so sorry to hear that. Are you all right? Is there anything I can get you?" he asked solicitously, managing to sound as if he meant every word.

Their hosts echoed his sentiments, and she spoke to them first. "No, thank you. I'll be fine, but I'm sorry to say that I must depart. Thank you so much for inviting me."

Mrs. Shea, with whom she'd always had a special rapport, rose and kissed both of her cheeks. "Take care, Melody," she said warmly. "Go home and go to bed. Have your maid bring you a hot toddy. It'll help with your headache and help you get to sleep."

"Thank you, Mrs. Shea. I shall certainly do that."

Then she put her hand out to Harden. "It was very nice to meet you, Mr. Worth."



He pressed his lips to her hand, murmuring over it, "Charmed, I'm sure, Miss Kane. I do hope you'll feel better soon. Perhaps we will see each other again while I'm in New York."

*Not if I see you first*, she thought unkindly but said, "I'm sure we'll cross paths eventually, Mr. Worth. Good night."

She couldn't get away from that place quickly enough, and even the trip back to the house—which was really very short—seemed to take forever. Once there, Melly raced up the stairs and into the house, piling her cloak and gloves onto their long-suffering butler, Walters, before sprinting up the stairs in a manner that she knew her mother would complain at her about if she were there.

But she wasn't. She knew Adelaide, her younger sister, would be asleep and that she probably had a couple of hours before they came home—her mother and her companion. If there was anything Mrs. Kane hated to do, it was missing a chance to eat—and drink—her social betters out of house and home. She would be there as long as she possibly could without alienating them, all while taking them for every penny she could at backgammon.

Ramona Kane didn't have a lot of skills beyond those that were considered necessary to snag a rich husband—which she had done in Melody's father—but she could beat pretty much anyone at backgammon.

Unfortunately, Trevor Kane had died when Melly was just a little girl. They were set financially because of him, but Melody really felt the lack of a father as she was growing up—someone to balance Mona's overbearing tendencies.

As she stood in front of the full-length mirror, looking at the livid red—seemingly indelible—handprints that a strange man had left on her bottom, she wondered what her mother would say if she ever saw them. She'd probably just keel over, dead as a doornail at the very idea that her "little girl" had allowed someone to touch her like that.

As if she'd had a choice in the matter!

Melly had never felt scared of a man before now. All of her

suitors—indeed, all of the men in her life as she'd grown up—had been utterly circumspect around her and very respectful of her. No man who had called on her or taken her to tea or whirled her around a ballroom had ever made even the slightest rude advance. Where she'd gotten the courage—more likely the foolhardiness—to slap the biggest man she'd ever met and a man whose temperament no one really knew—she would never know.

But as she lay down on her back in her bed, then, on second thought, rolled onto her tummy, she realized just how blithe and unaware of her own safety she was. And she wasn't sure whether she should curse or thank Harden Worth for having pointed that out to her.

It was really no contest—curse. She was definitely going to curse him, she decided quickly, falling asleep seconds later with that wonderfully satisfying thought.