



AFTER *the* SHADOWS

secrets of SWEETWATER CROSSING



AMANDA
CABOT



Books by Amanda Cabot

HISTORICAL ROMANCE

MESQUITE SPRINGS SERIES

Out of the Embers
Dreams Rekindled
The Spark of Love

CIMARRON CREEK TRILOGY

A Stolen Heart
A Borrowed Dream
A Tender Hope

TEXAS DREAMS SERIES

Paper Roses
Scattered Petals
Tomorrow's Garden

Christmas Roses
*One Little Word: A Sincerely
Yours Novella*

WESTWARD WINDS SERIES

Summer of Promise
Waiting for Spring
With Autumn's Return

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

TEXAS CROSSROADS SERIES

At Bluebonnet Lake
In Firefly Valley
On Lone Star Trail

secrets of SWEETWATER CROSSING • 1



AFTER *the*
SHADOWS



AMANDA
CABOT



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Amanda Cabot, *After the Shadows*
Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2023. Used by permission.

© 2023 by Amanda Cabot

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cabot, Amanda, 1948- author.

Title: After the shadows / Amanda Cabot.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2023] | Series: Secrets of Sweetwater Crossing

Identifiers: LCCN 2022014281 | ISBN 9780800740641 (paperback) | ISBN
9780800742652 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493439706 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3603.A35 A69 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20220328

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022014281>

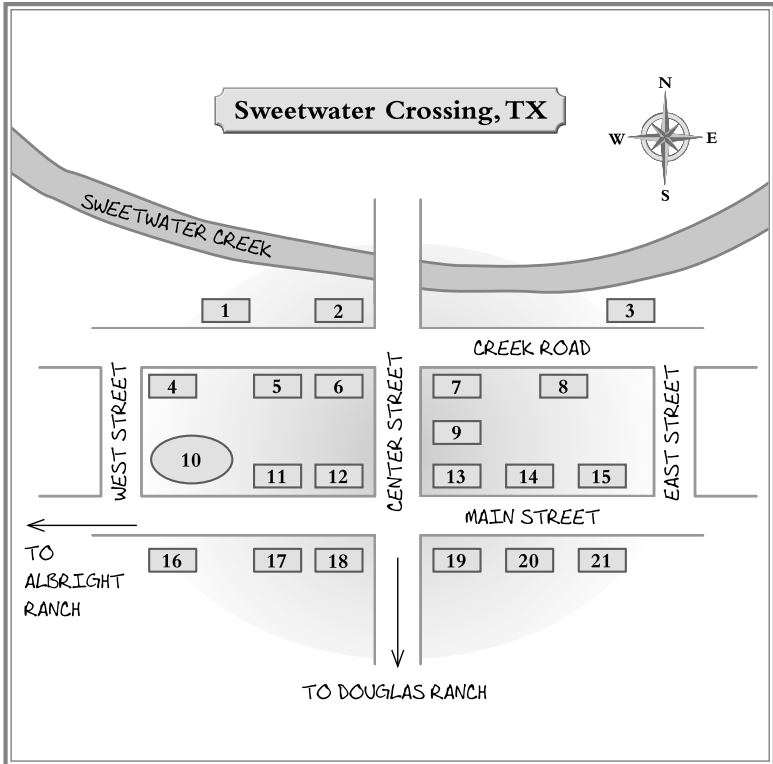
This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the King James Version (KJV).

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 2 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Peggy Jo Wells,
whose love of the Lord
shines through everything she says and does



- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 – Mrs. Sanders’s Home | 12 – School |
| 2 – Cemetery | 13 – Church |
| 3 – Finley House | 14 – Mayor’s Home and Office |
| 4 – Saloon | 15 – Mercantile |
| 5 – Mrs. French’s Home | 16 – Livery |
| 6 – Mrs. Locke’s Home | 17 – Sheriff’s Home and Office |
| 7 – Mrs. Adams’s Home | 18 – Ma’s Kitchen |
| 8 – The Albrights’ Home | 19 – Dr. Sheridan’s Home and Office |
| 9 – Mrs. Carmichael’s Home | 20 – Post Office |
| 10 – Park | 21 – Dressmaker |
| 11 – Alice Patton’s home/Library | |

Chapter

One

AUGUST 19, 1882

Everything looked the same. The live oaks in the park still shadowed this block of Main Street, providing a welcome respite from the early afternoon sun. In the schoolyard, two boys vied to see who could swing higher, while another scuffed his feet, impatiently waiting for his turn. Beulah Douglas raced down the street, her single blond braid flapping against her back. It wasn't the first time Emily had seen the twelve-year-old hurrying, but today she was moving faster than Emily remembered, probably because she'd spent more time than usual with Father's horse and knew her parents would be looking for her. Other than Beulah's uncharacteristic speed, nothing appeared to have changed, but Emily Leland knew otherwise. Everything had changed. Or perhaps only she had changed.

She guided her horse onto Center Street, trying not to frown at the memories the sight of the small church sent rushing through her. All those Sundays sitting sandwiched between her two younger sisters in what everyone called the preacher's pew, not daring to fidget even when Father's sermon lasted for

what seemed like hours. The Christmas and Easter services when well-meaning parishioners pinched her cheeks and told her mother that even though Emily was shorter than her sisters and might not be as talented, she was the prettiest of the Vaughn girls, that her blond hair and blue eyes made her look like an angel.

She was no angel, but she'd been a happy girl. And when she'd left Sweetwater Crossing, she'd been a bride smiling at her groom and dreaming of the life they'd share. Now . . . Emily adjusted the sleeves of the black dress she'd found in the attic and had hastily altered to fit, ensuring that neither the sun nor prying eyes would see her skin.

Mama had insisted that the hallmark of a lady was her lily-white complexion. Mama had said . . . Emily bit her lip. She wouldn't cry. After all, tears solved nothing. If there was anything she'd learned in the last year, it was that.

She kept her gaze fixed firmly ahead as she approached the corner of Creek, refusing to look at the cemetery. The wrought-iron gates would be open; the cypress trees had probably grown an inch or two, and somewhere within the fenced area was a new grave. Since it was too soon for grass to have covered it, it would be what Mama called a raw grave. The grave wasn't the only thing that was raw. So too was Emily. This was far from the homecoming she'd dreamt of.

"We're here." There was no need to tell the horse, for Blanche's ears had perked and she'd tossed her head in apparent delight as they'd approached town. While Emily dreaded what faced her, Blanche was happy to have returned. For her, the barn behind the house that still looked out of place in this small Hill Country town was home. Blanche was probably anticipating a reunion with Father's horse, never questioning her welcome, while Emily wondered what awaited her within the stone mansion.

She looped the reins over the hitching post on the side of the

house, then returned to the front. Fourteen months ago, she would have entered through the closest door, but today she felt the need to climb the front steps as if she were a visitor. For she was. She wouldn't knock on the door, but she also would not use the entrance that had been reserved for family. The harsh tone of her sister's letter after all those months of silence had made her cautious.

As she stepped inside, Emily took a deep breath, savoring the familiar scents of floor polish mingling with the lavender of Mama's sachets. The house was blessedly cool compared to the summer sun, the silence normal for a Saturday afternoon when everyone spoke in hushed voices lest they disturb Father while he was writing his sermon. Only parishioners were allowed to interrupt him, and the majority knew his schedule well enough to time their visits for the morning.

It was an ordinary Saturday afternoon, or as ordinary as one could be without the woman who'd turned this house into a home. For a moment, Emily let herself believe that everything would be fine. Then, mustering her courage, she called out, "Father! Joanna! Louisa! I'm here." By some small miracle, her voice did not tremble, nor did it reveal the grief that threatened to overwhelm her.

There was no sound from the library that had been Father's office for as long as she could recall, but Emily's youngest sister emerged from the kitchen, an apron tied around her waist, a frown on her normally smiling face.

"I wasn't sure you'd come." Louisa's voice radiated anger, sorrow, and something that might have been fear.

Emily had been wrong in thinking she was the only one who'd changed. So too had her sister.

"I left as soon as I received your letter." The letter whose tone had worried her as much as its content. Though Emily wanted nothing more than to gather her sister into her arms, hoping that a warm embrace would lessen their grief, Louisa's

forbidding expression stopped her. If she wanted comfort, Louisa would have to take the first step. As it was, she stood there stiffly, her hands clenched into fists, and shook her head, loosening a strand of medium-brown hair from her chignon.

Four inches taller and with more curves than Emily, Emily's half sister shared only one characteristic with her: deep-blue eyes, a legacy from their mother. Right now, those eyes were as angry as her voice.

Trying to calm her thoughts, Emily glanced around the spacious foyer whose twin staircases mirrored those of the house's exterior. Mama had once confessed that she found it all a bit ostentatious, but Father would not consider leaving the home he'd promised his closest friend he'd care for, especially when he realized Clive would never return.

"We owe it to Clive," he'd told Mama. She'd nodded, her resignation apparent.

But Mama would nod no more.

The enormity of the situation hit Emily with more force than she'd thought possible, turning her legs to jelly.

"I can't believe it's true," she said, her voice no longer steady. "Father always said he'd be the first to go."

"But he wasn't. Father's lost without her," Louisa continued as she led Emily into the parlor. In the past, they might have sat in the kitchen, sipping cups of coffee as they talked. Today, however, Louisa appeared to want more formality. She perched on the edge of one of the least comfortable chairs in the room and gestured toward the one facing it, telling Emily this would be a confrontation, not two sisters comforting each other.

"He walks around in a daze, and when he leaves, he doesn't tell me where he's going." Louisa glanced through the open doorway into the hall. "He had lunch with me, but he must have gone out again. It's awful, Emily, awful. He won't even sleep in the room they shared." She closed her eyes, clearly attempting to control her emotions. "It's been horrible trying to be strong

for him.” And that was a role Louisa, as the youngest, had never needed to assume. Perhaps that was part of the reason for her uncharacteristic coldness.

“Where’s Joanna?” Though their sister had sometimes seemed capricious, declaring nothing was as important as playing the piano, she’d also helped Mama keep the house spotless. The layer of dust on the spinet made Emily wonder whether Joanna’s grief was so deep that she, like Father, was in a daze.

Louisa’s eyes flew open, sorrow replaced by anger. “As if you care!”

Emily cared. Oh, how she cared. She’d written letters to the family every week, asking about each of them, hoping their lives were happier than hers, but there’d been no response.

“Joanna’s in Europe with her grandmother. They left a couple months ago and are supposed to be gone for a year, maybe longer.” Louisa’s voice was harsh. “Her dreams are coming true, just like yours did. You got a handsome husband; Joanna’s studying music with a master, and I’m stuck here alone.” Louisa glared at Emily. “You should have been here. Mama asked for you at the end, even though she knew you wouldn’t come.”

The words ricocheted through the room before piercing Emily’s heart. “Why would she think that?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. That letter George wrote for you was very clear. You may have scalded your hand, but that didn’t stop you from telling us you were a Leland now and didn’t need any of us Vaughns, so we shouldn’t bother writing to you or coming for a visit.”

Emily bit down the bile that threatened to erupt at the evidence of George’s cruelty. She’d known something was wrong when she’d found Louisa’s letter in his pocket—“*I’m not sure you’ll care,*” her sister had written, “*but I thought you should know that our mother died*”—but she hadn’t realized the extent of her husband’s depravity.

“Mama couldn’t believe you’d written that letter,” Louisa

continued. “She said she was going to visit you, no matter what you’d said, but Father told her you needed time to adjust to being a wife. He was convinced you’d change your mind, but when three months went by and you didn’t answer any of our letters, even he gave up.”

No wonder Emily had received no response to the letters she’d written. In all likelihood, George hadn’t mailed them any more than he’d given her the ones her family had sent. It was probably only chance that he hadn’t destroyed Louisa’s last letter. Or maybe he’d meant to torment Emily with it, promising she could visit her family once she gave him what he wanted. She’d never know.

“Mama was devastated,” Louisa continued, “and Father looked like he’d been bludgeoned. You know he always tried his best not to treat you differently from his real daughters.”

Emily winced. She was the offspring of Mama’s first marriage, while Joanna was Father’s daughter from an earlier marriage. Only Louisa had been raised in a home with both of her parents. Even though Joseph Vaughn was the only father Emily remembered, for as long as she could recall she’d known he wasn’t the man who’d sired her. Most days it hadn’t mattered, but when one of the girls was angry and wanted to hurt her sisters, parentage was a convenient weapon.

“It was bad enough that you didn’t answer Mama’s letters, but I never thought you’d ignore the one I sent you, telling you she was failing and wanted to see you.”

Ignoring Emily’s gasp, Louisa continued. “How could you leave me to do everything by myself? When we were girls, you promised you’d always be there for me, but when I needed you most, you stayed on your ranch with your husband. I’ll never forgive you for that.”

No wonder Louisa was so angry. She believed Emily had willingly abandoned her. And that, like sending a hateful letter, was something Emily wouldn’t do.

“I never received your letters.”

Louisa scoffed. “You can say that, but I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it, Louisa, because it’s the truth. I didn’t write that awful letter, and the only one I received from you was the one announcing Mama’s death.”

Her sister’s eyes flashed with disdain. “A likely story and one you can’t prove, especially since you admit you received the last one. As for the one you sent us, I know you didn’t write it. George wrote that letter, but you dictated it.”

Emily hadn’t. She would never have written, dictated, or had any part in something like that, for it was as far from the truth as east was from west. Surely her family knew that. But it appeared that whatever George had written had convinced them that Emily no longer wanted to be part of the family.

Knowing she had only one defense that Louisa would accept, she held out her hands, turning them so her sister could see both sides. “Look. There are no scars. I never scalded my hand.”

Though Louisa studied Emily’s hands, she still appeared dubious. “You must have said those things. Why else would George have written them?”

Because he wanted me totally dependent on him. Even though it might exonerate her, Emily wouldn’t say that. When she’d left the ranch that had been her home for over a year, she had vowed that no one would know the truth of her marriage. Some things were too horrible to put into words. Besides, she didn’t want pity or even sympathy. All she wanted was to forget.

Louisa raised her head and met Emily’s gaze. “Where is George? I’m surprised he’d let you travel alone.”

He wouldn’t have. He hadn’t even let Emily go into town unless he accompanied her, and by telling everyone she had delicate nerves and was easily disturbed by visitors, he’d ensured that the neighboring ranchers’ wives stayed away. Visits, he’d told her, would be her reward when she fulfilled her mission. But she hadn’t. Fortunately, George could no longer control her life.

Emily squared her shoulders, knowing there was no need to cower. “George is dead.”

“Dead?” The blood drained from Louisa’s face as the word registered.

“He was killed in a fight at the saloon.” The anger that his hopes for a son had been dashed again had been more intense this time than any other month, leaving bruises that had yet to fade. Emily thought he’d gotten himself under control before leaving the ranch, but it appeared he hadn’t. The sheriff said he’d started the fight.

Louisa shook her head, dumbfounded. “I don’t know what to say other than I’m sorry.”

I’m not.



“Food.”

Craig Ferguson smiled when his son’s stomach rumbled, confirming his hunger. Though the boy frequently claimed to be famished, perhaps because eating helped alleviate the boredom of their journey, this time the need was real.

“You’re right, Noah. It’s time to eat.” Craig nodded when he saw a row of trees ahead. They’d provide welcome shade from the August sun, and if his assumption that they lined the banks of a stream was accurate, he and Noah would also have a source of water. This part of Texas might be cooler than Galveston, but it was still hot, and fresh water was always welcome.

Even if there was no stream, stopping would give Noah a chance to run. That too would be welcome. Craig knew it was hard for a two-and-a-half-year-old to sit in a wagon for so long. It was also hard for him. He and Noah shared more than the same dark brown hair and eyes. Being a schoolmaster might not involve heavy labor, but it kept Craig on his feet most of the day. The extended periods of sitting involved in traveling halfway across the state were difficult for both of them, but the result

would be worth it: a new home, a new beginning, and—if his prayers were answered—the end of Noah’s nightmares.

“Me eat?” Noah darted an anxious look at the back of the wagon when Craig brought it to a stop.

“We’ll both eat.” And so would Hercules, thanks to the lush grass. “But let’s see who can reach those trees first.” Craig lifted Noah and set him on the ground, knowing his son needed to release some energy. Noah had slept better since they’d been on the road, bolstering Craig’s belief that the change, which many had considered extreme, would hasten the healing process, but that extra sleep meant the boy had an even greater need for activity.

“Me! Me run!”

As Noah scampered toward the trees, Craig grabbed the bag that contained their food and followed at a leisurely pace. Noah might fall in his hurry to win the race, but the thick grass meant he wouldn’t hurt himself, and he’d feel independent. Rachel would have been proud. She’d claimed that the most important things parents could do were ensure that their children knew they were loved and give them the freedom to make mistakes.

“They’ll learn from them,” she’d declared.

“Who’s the teacher here, you or me?” Craig had asked, feigning annoyance, though he knew Rachel would see through his pretense. They’d rarely argued, and when they did, it was usually because Craig thought she was being too impulsive. But there was nothing impulsive that day, simply a shared desire to raise their soon-to-be-born child the best they could.

“We’ll both teach our baby,” she’d said. “That’s the reason God gave children two parents.”

But now Noah had only one.

“Water, Pa, water!” Noah shrieked in delight.

Craig, who was only one step behind him, moved to his side, ready to catch him if he seemed likely to tumble into it, then smiled when he realized the stream was only a few inches deep.

It would provide water to wash down the bread and cheese he'd bought in the last town but wouldn't be a threat to his son's safety.

"Me wade."

Craig's smile broadened at Noah's use of the word he'd learned the day before they'd left Galveston. "I thought you were hungry." He rubbed Noah's stomach, then bent down to listen to it. "Yep. You're hungry. Let's eat first, and then you can wade."

He wouldn't deprive his son of the simple pleasure of splashing in a creek, particularly when there was no need to rush. The journey had taken less time than he'd expected, and unless they encountered a major delay, they'd arrive in Sweetwater Crossing two days earlier than he'd arranged with Mrs. Carmichael. He hoped that wouldn't create a problem, but if she wasn't ready for them, he and Noah could sleep in the wagon as they'd done every night since they'd left home.

"Good." Noah reached for the bag of food, confirming Craig's priorities.

What was good was that his son had not had a single nightmare since they left Galveston.

"He'll forget," the minister's wife had told Craig a week after Rachel was laid to rest. "Children that young forget quickly."

But Noah had not, not even after a year had passed. He still refused to be separated from Craig, even though he was too young to spend his days in a schoolroom. He still woke screaming at least once a week . . . until they'd left the house that held tragic memories. The difference was dramatic, proof that God still answered prayers.

Craig hoped Noah's healing would continue once they reached Sweetwater Crossing. The gently rolling hills with their sandstone and limestone outcroppings, the roads canopied with live oak branches, and the open fields carpeted with wildflowers filled his heart with joy and the sense of peace that had been

missing for too long. That and the hope that Noah had begun to heal made him more confident that the decision to come to the Hill Country had been a wise one.

Though he'd balked at the thought of leaving the home he and Rachel had shared, Noah's problems convinced Craig there was little choice but to change their lives, and so he prayed for guidance. His prayers were answered sooner than he expected. Only days after he'd first prayed about his future, the minister mentioned a letter he'd received, saying a town in the Hill Country would need a new schoolteacher because the current one was about to marry.

In less time than Craig had thought possible, everything was arranged. The decision makers had been impressed with his credentials and had offered him the position of schoolmaster, a position that included room and board as well as a small salary. Craig and Noah would live with a widow who claimed to love children and whose house was catty-cornered from the school. It sounded ideal, a chance to put the past behind them. And maybe, just maybe, both he and Noah would find peace in the Hill Country.



"I wish Father were back," Louisa said as she glanced at the clock.

So did Emily. After Louisa's grudging welcome, she needed the comfort of his smile and a hug. Where was he? In the past, unless one of his parishioners had an emergency, their father spent most of Saturday afternoon writing and rewriting his sermon. A year ago, he would not have left without telling someone where he was going. But according to Louisa, their father was greatly changed.

"Do you want to help me make supper?" Louisa rose and smoothed her apron, further evidence that it wasn't only Father who was changed. The Louisa Emily knew would not have left

the kitchen without removing her apron. But, then again, the Louisa Emily knew would have acknowledged their shared sorrow, not treated Emily like an adversary. “You always were the better cook, and you know how Father depends on a hot meal served precisely at six.”

“Of course, I’ll help.” Emily accepted the olive branch her sister had extended.

As they passed the library, she glanced inside. The desk was cluttered with papers, the two chairs in front of it turned sideways, evidence of visitors. Both were common occurrences. Father’s absence was not.

As if she’d read Emily’s thoughts, Louisa paused and stared at the empty desk chair. “He’s different. Nothing’s been the same since Mama . . .” Louisa’s voice broke, and tears filled her eyes.

“How did it happen?” Like her sister, Emily wouldn’t pronounce the word *died*, but she needed to know. While Emily and her sisters had had measles, chicken pox, and other ailments, she could not recall Mama ever being ill.

“Doc Sheridan claimed it was a virulent fever. He bled her, but that didn’t do any good. She just kept getting worse.” This time Louisa shuddered, her grief visible. “Oh, Emily, it was awful watching her waste away. I tried to help, but no one would listen to me.”

And that refusal would have made the situation even worse for Louisa. Not only was she left alone to care for their mother, but her knowledge of the healing arts, while not as extensive as Doc’s, had been dismissed. It was no wonder she was lashing out in anger.

Hoping her sister wouldn’t reject her attempt to comfort her, Emily wrapped her arms around Louisa. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here. There’s nothing I could have done to save her—you know far more than I do about healing—but I could have helped in other ways. I could have—”

Emily stopped, her thoughts arrested by the unexpected odor wafting through the hallway. She'd closed the front door behind her, but all the windows were open in an attempt to cool the house. She sniffed the air again. "It smells like smoke." And fire was one of the town's greatest threats. Though many of the houses were made of stone, others and almost all the outbuildings were wooden structures.

Their grief shoved aside for a second, the sisters ran to the front porch, searching for the source. Billows of dark, acrid smoke rose from Center Street, turning the clear blue sky an ominous gray.

"It's either the church or Mrs. Carmichael's house." Louisa stared at the smoke, appearing frozen by shock.

"We've got to help." Emily touched her sister's arm. "They'll need water. You take the kitchen pail." At this time of the day, it was sure to be almost full.

The urgency in Emily's voice seemed to break through Louisa's shock. "There are two," she said. "We'll go together. Come on, sister."

Though it took an emergency to reunite them, for the first time since she'd returned home, Emily felt as if they really were sisters.