

# *C O D Y*

## CHAPTER 1

It always seemed that the main street of this small western town was congested at this time of morning. To Cody Daniels, it appeared as if the whole world came to do their errands all at once. *Holy Smokes, people,* Cody often thought, *you folks just seen each other only last week.* And sure enough, week after week the townsfolk would behave as though they'd just discovered long-lost friends. On market days, no one seemed to notice the simmering heat rising from the sun-baked earth.

Cody was usually fascinated by the weary cowboys who rode in from the range atop thirsty horses. Their clothes were ingrained with red prairie dust that creased their weathered faces shielded by cowboy hats. The blood-shot eyes of the quiet men searched for the local saloon or a place to bed down for a night.

Today a creaking wagon hauled by heavy draft horses merged with a stage coach on this mid-1800 summer morning. Following behind came a couple of local farmers perched on their wooden carts loaded with produce.

Ever since Cody could remember, this

dirt-packed street of the town sprouting in the middle of nowhere wallowed in its glory on market day. Everyone was out and about, eager to get their errands done before the sun's gentle rays transformed into tenacious, scorching fingers.

But today, Cody's fascination was focused on what was happening in the alley next to the blacksmith's shop. The busy townsfolk were oblivious to the three seedy unchecked teens tormenting a timid eight-year-old youngster. Cody could see why the lad was a victim of ridicule. The child was clad in hand-me-down velvet shorts and a matching jacket. The boy sported a crude girlish bobbed-haircut molded with the aid of a mixing bowl.

One of the teens, a pale-faced pimply lad with a lock of oily hair slicked down over one eye, was amused by the boy's appearance. "Look at little Miss Sissy!" he snickered to the other bullies.

The poor little youngster's lower lip trembled, but somehow he kept his tears at bay. "I ain't no sissy," the boy replied defiantly.

A freckled-face teen joined in with gleaming meanness, mocking the child. "Sure y'are! And you a might pretty little Miss Sissy at that!"

The teen jabbed the heel of his hand into

the boy's shoulder. The pathetic little fellow lost his footing and tumbled backward into an abandoned dry watering trough. "What's the matter, boy? Can't stand up on your own two feet?"

The pimply teen pointed to the delicate satin shoes strapped on the child's feet. "No wonder the pretty sissy can't stand up. Just look at them shoes!"

The three teens gazed at the youngster's feminine slippers and burst into convulsive laughter.

Cody stood in the shadows of the General store watching the tormenting session. A quiet wisdom surpassed his sixteen years. Cody was a good-looking chap, blessed with the promise of aging into a handsome young man.

Already Cody was aware he was turning the head of Kristy Marks, the fifteen-year-old daughter of the town's wealthy banker. Kristy was pretty enough, but Cody wasn't convinced he was ready for such head spinning.

Kristy's eyes were fixed on Cody like a hawk eyeing its prey. Strolling along the dusty street with a girl friend at her side, Kristy twirled a lacy parasol. The rich girl's fine linen dress contrasted sharply with Cody's faded cotton shirt and worn baggy trousers supported by tattered leather suspenders.

“Hello, Cody,” Kristy called out with a winning smile.

Cody’s piercing blue eyes squinted in the sunshine as he acknowledged the pretty girl’s greeting with a polite nod of his head. His concentration, though, remained affixed to the tormenting session unfolding in the alley.

Kristy was undaunted by Cody’s apparent lack of interest. The girl at her side, however, noticed the determined look in her friend’s eye. “Forget it,” she scoffed. “He doesn’t even know you’re alive.”

“One more remark like that, Mary Ellen, and I won’t let you be my bridesmaid at my wedding,” warned Kristy.

“You really think you two will get married some day?”

Kristy turned up her nose defiantly. “I know we will.”

“Should I put it down on my calendar?” teased her friend.

“I’ll let you know.”

“When?” prodded the girl.

A calculating smile came to Kristy’s lips. “Just as soon as I ask him.”

Kristy’s friend shook her head. “Pipe dreams. Kristy, your father won’t let you marry Cody and you know it.”

“Wanna make a bet?” glared Kristy.

“Bet you he won’t,” replied Mary Ellen smartly.

Kristy stopped short and frowned at the girl. “And why not, for Heaven’s Sake? My mother says Cody’s a good catch.”

“You know why. He’s too poor.”

Kristy tossed off the comment with a shrug of her shoulder. “Who needs money?” Throwing the unfavorable remark to the wayside, Kristy added, “Have you forgotten my mother owns over half the stock in father’s bank? And what she says goes.”

Thrusting her nose into the air, Kristy strutted off. With a shrug of resignation, Mary Ellen hastened to join her friend.

Unaware that he had been the subject of Kristy’s affection from afar, Cody swept up a piece of straw and gently stroked it between his fingers as he studied the teenage bullies.

The third teen, a sweaty lad with dusty bare feet, caught sight of Cody’s penetrating gaze. He nudged his two buddies and gestured toward the silent eavesdropper. The boys followed their friend’s gaze to find Cody watching them.

“What ‘cha want?” called the sweaty teen.

“I want you should mind your own business,” answered Cody without wavering.

The pimply teen threw back his head and

laughed. "Look who's talking! We minding our own business. You the one buttin' in."

"You forgettin' something, smart boy," added the freckled teen. "It's three against one."

The corners of Cody's lips slowly turned up in a smile. "No, it ain't. It's three against two."

The freckled teen shoved the youngster forward and snickered. "If you be a'meanin' half-pint here, it's three against one and a half."

The three teens nudged one another and broke into gales of laughter. Cody's eyes darted from one teen to the next. Sliding two fingers into his mouth, Cody sounded a shrill whistle.

The teens fell into stunned silence. Their eyes suddenly grew wide as a magnificent stallion bounded around the corner.

The horse trotted over to where Cody stood. With a nod of his powerful head, the horse reared on his hind legs, towering above the frightened teens. The terrified boys stumbled over one another, scrambling to get out of harm's way as they scattered. Cody and the youngster were left alone with the horse standing quietly at Cody's side.

The child followed Cody's gaze to the dusty satin shoes strapped to his little feet. "Them's my sister's shoes," he said, offering a

quick explanation. "I ain't got none of my own. Ma says not till winter."

From over his shoulder, Cody heard Pa calling. "Cody!" Spinning about, Cody saw his father gesturing to him with a wave of his hand.

Pa was a clean-shaven handsome man, modest in speech and dress. In his mid-thirties, the hard working man was still lean and muscular.

Giving his beloved horse an affectionate pat on his silky coat, Cody glanced at the child. "You gonna be just fine now."

Cody headed toward Pa's wooden wagon parked in front of the General Store. Harnessed to the wagon was Pa's old white mare, Dolly, a critter of incredible patience.

The old white mare had once been part of a wild herd roaming the range. Cody had taken an interest in the aging mare and eventually gained her trust. Once he had successfully befriended the mare, Cody took it upon himself to train her. He devoted himself to the mare until Dolly found herself part of his family.

Glancing over his shoulder, Cody called to his horse who stood waiting. "Come on, Roy." The stallion nodded with a nicker and pranced after Cody.

The youngster lingered behind watching after them. His gaze held admiration for Cody

and his horse.

Cody's mother stood on the porch of the General Store. In her early thirties, Ma was youthful and tender of face. Like her husband and son, Ma dressed in the style of simple folk, calling no attention to her lovely figure draped in homespun clothing.

Ma paused before the store's glass window. Her pretty image was reflected in the glass. Ma's eyes were transfixed, not on her figure, but on the lovely dress trimmed with delicate lace and caressed with yards of fine material . . . a dress much too extravagant for her meager purse.

Pa was too preoccupied with tucking the store-bought goods into the back of the wagon to take heed of Ma. Though Pa took no notice of Ma's longing, Cody did.

Studying his Ma, Cody was aware that her heart was yearning for something she could not possibly possess. His face betrayed the sorrow his heart felt at seeing his Ma deprived of the extravagant dress.

"Come along, Ma," called Pa, eager to be on his way.

Ma lingered just one moment longer, etching the details of the lovely dress into her memory before hurrying to the wagon.

Cody assisted Pa in arranging the boxes

of store-bought goods as Ma adjusted her bonnet's bow beneath her chin. Offering his hand, Pa helped Ma into the wagon. Glancing at the brilliant sun glaring down above them in the western sky, Pa wiped his brow with the back of his hand and nodded to Cody. "It'll be growing hot on us if we don't get a move on."

"Yes, Pa," agreed Cody. As he turned his head, his eyes locked onto the town's quaint wooden church at the end of the dusty street. The church stood apart from the rest of the businesses lining the street, an oasis surrounded by a green lawn and shade trees. "Pa, mind if I join you and Ma in a spell?"

"You got business, son?"

"Sort'a, Pa," admitted Cody.

Pa gave his consent without further thought. "Don't be long, son." Climbing onto the wooden seat of the wagon, Pa took his place beside Ma and gathered the reins in his hands. "You know how your Ma worries about you till you're home."

Ma cast Pa a scolding glance. "He's my boy, Pa," she said sweetly. "I got a right to worry about my boy till I know he's home. And I'm a'gonna keep right on worrying about my boy till he's home."

Pa winked at Cody and whispered, "See what I mean?" Giving a gentle tug on the reins,

Dolly became instantly alert. Raising her head and anxious to be on her way, Dolly trotted down the dusty road, pulling the wagon behind her.

Ma glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes met Cody's. "You hurry home, son!"

Cody waved and watched the wagon until it disappeared around the bend. His attention turned to the tiny church. Stroking Roy's nose, Cody spoke quietly. "Come on, boy. We got business with the Lord."

Cody strolled the short distance down the dusty road with Roy trailing along behind. He entered the church, leaving Roy to graze on the front lawn.

Cody glanced around at the empty sanctuary, taking in the details of the simple construction. He had never been inside the church when it was empty. The faithful that flocked here every Sunday had always filled the little structure to capacity.

Sinking onto a wooden pew, Cody bowed his head. He was unaware of the pastor, Reverend Fryer, entering the sanctuary just then. The preacher was surprised to find the teen seated alone in the quiet church. The pastor stepped into the shadows. From where he stood, Reverend Fryer heard the words spoken by Cody.

“Lord,” Cody began, speaking to his Savior, “you know I ain’t got much in this earthly world. Probably never will. And you know Ma’s birthday is a’comin’ and I ain’t got nothing to give her.”

From his hiding place Reverend Fryer smiled, touched by Cody’s words.

“And so, Lord,” continued Cody, “I was a’wonderin’ if you might help me to figure some way to raise the money. Lord, Ma has her sights set on that there pretty dress that’s all made up in the store window. You know how her hands are gettin’ themselves all knotted up from her hard work. And she ain’t even old yet. It’s hard for her to make her own clothes nowadays.”

Reverend Fryer searched his pocket. Yanking a clean handkerchief from his pants pocket, the man wiped away a tear.

“She ain’t got nearly the strength nowadays to do no sewing. And she won’t have to for awhile, not if I was to buy her that there dress hangin’ in the window.”

A sad expression registered on the pastor’s face. Lowering his head, Reverend Fryer quietly slipped out of the church.

“Lord, make a way so as I can buy her that dress she’s been eyeing,” Cody prayed in earnest.

Having laid his request before the Lord, Cody drew a sigh and rested his back against the wooden pew. From outside the church came the sound of a man blowing his nose.

Reverend Fryer stuffed the handkerchief into his pocket and quietly approached Roy. He hesitated for a moment to tenderly stroke Roy's neck before continuing on to the small structure beside the church which served as his home.